

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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**Editorial****The New Millennium**

A thousand years is too weighty a subject for me to deal with. I will limit myself to the standard greetings of Happy New Year. But in passing I would like to remind you of my reference to the New Renaissance, in Newsletter, December 1989. Let us live our lives in accordance with the laws of nature in which case we might survive for another 1000 years.

**Kihim Diary**

We were in Kihim from 24th October to 24th November, 1999 and Anish Andheria has written in this issue about his visit to our place during this period. But while in Kihim I was

looking over the 'AKHBAR BOOK' which gives 'KHABAR' about old days, and I found the following notes by Salim Ali:

"I shall confine myself merely to certain happenings in the sphere of local ornithology. There is nothing unusual in the happenings, but these will be interesting records after 50 years. The generation now in the bud, of whom I have high hopes will find them so (I hope)."

"Two flocks of flamingoes (50 and 26) flying North on 23.4.43; 2 pairs green bee-eaters and one pair white breasted kingfishers nesting in Al Murad compound. Pitta and blue-cheeked (or Blue-tailed?) bee-eaters appeared overnight 19th, 24th May respectively after rainy and stormy nights. Last Blyth's reed warbler at Bhombur 25th May. One pair quaker babblers for 1st time ever near 'Latifa' 12-19 May."

Salim Ali  
27.5.1943

"The first attempt to catch birds with a mist net ended disastrously. Between all yesterday (15 Nov), and upto 2 pm today (16 Nov) only 3 birds were caught i.e. 1 spotted babbler, 1 grey drongo, 1 Blyth's reed warbler. 1st and 3rd were ringed. No. 2 got away after much fighting and drawing blood. With a number of nets and enthusiastic netters I am sure some very useful work could be done here in the intervals between eating and sleeping."

Salim Ali  
16.xi.1980

Apart from looking through old records, I had a few thrilling encounters in the field. On 19 Nov I saw a couple of ashy swallow shrikes (*Artamus fuscus*) on a telegraph wire near the pond. These birds which were seen in large flocks a decade ago have become rather rare.

But the sight of the Millennium on the same day was of the whitebellied fishing (sea) eagle. I was walking on the beach homewards, when for some inexplicable reason I turned round and within 50 metres I saw this eagle with outstretched wings 'sailing' westwards towards the sea. There was a fairly strong breeze and the bird heading it was able to advance without a single flap of the wings or seemingly no movement at all until it covered the distance of about 1/2 a furlong. When it reached the edge of the ocean (it was ebb tide), it banked steeply on the right, making a ninety degree turn more elegantly than any aircraft can do. But within 5 seconds it did an about turn (as gull-billed terns do regularly), dropped like a stone, caught its prey in its talons and flapped away to land on a rock in the water, too far away for me to see what it had caught. But from its subsequent actions - holding the prey in its claws, bending down, tearing the victim to pieces with jerks, I thought it could be one of the larger plovers. I have seldom seen a more arresting sight. I watched the scene for 20 minutes until the eagle had finished its meal. Then it walked into a pool, washed its beak, and flew away southwards towards Alibag. The nesting season is from October to June, and we heard these birds on a number of occasions calling with their special far reaching kenk - kenk - kenk - kenk.

**Wishing all our Readers a very Happy & Prosperous Millennium Year 2000**

Another interesting sight was of a common grey hornbill family (*Tockus birostris*), the one with a casque on its bill. There were two adults and two young ones, which we think had nested in a very suitable hollow in a jamun tree. According to the sycamore, these birds often come and have a mud bath near the stables. Is this a well known fact, about hornbills cleaning themselves in this fashion?

#### From My Bookshelf

It is a great pleasure to look through books which we have read long ago and stacked away collecting dust. In the process of dusting them I came across Himalayan and Kashmiri Birds (1923). The author Douglas Dewar writes in the preface : "Paradoxical though it may sound, the value of this book lies largely in its omissions! If this key had included all the birds of Kashmir and the Himalayas, it would have bewildered the user by its complexity, and so failed in its object." This is what I feel about some of the checklists which I receive for the Newsletter. Omitting some species which can be taken for granted and describing a few special ones in greater detail, morphologically, ecologically and aesthetically, would make the piece more enjoyable and educative. Even in describing birds, too many minor details are not always helpful. We must describe the "wood", not the individual tree. This is how Douglas Dewar describes the white-capped redstart : "A feathered exquisite. A snow-white cap; remainder of head, whole neck, breast, wings and upper back, rich velvety black. Tail, rump and abdomen bright chestnut red, so that as the bird leaps from a boulder in midstream into the air, it looks as though it were on fire." In these few words the habitat of the bird also is vividly indicated.

#### Richard Fitter's Contribution

I was late in requesting Richard to contribute for our 40th Anniversary number, but here is what he sent. For newcomers

I would like to say that Richard, for many years Honorary Secretary and then Vice President of the Fauna & Flora Preservation Society of London, has been the author of several books on birds and wild flowers, and has been responsible for many conservation projects worldwide, including Operation Oryx.

#### My Best Birdwatching Experience

*By far the most astonishing birdwatching experience I ever had was on VE Day + 1, May 9, 1945, the day after the end of the war in Europe. John Parrinder and I had decided to celebrate it by going down to the marshes on the south side of the Thames estuary east of London, a favoured pre-war birdwatching site. We were astounded to be rewarded with the sight of two black-winged stilts, a bird which neither of us had ever seen, and which had been a very rare pre-war visitor. Like most people who see stilts for the first time, we could not believe how long their legs were, and the experience enabled me to be sure that Richard Richardson, the artist for my Pocket Guide to British Birds, painted the legs long enough.*

*We found out later that there had been a minor invasion of England by stilts that year, because the Dutch had opened their flood-gates to foil the Germans, so that the stilts were driven away from their breeding grounds in the Netherlands. Altogether at least ten pairs were recorded in England, two of which bred successfully at Nottingham sewage farm in the Midlands.*

Richard Fitter, Drifts, Chinnor Hill, Chinnor, Oxon, England



## Birdwatching in New Forest, Dehra Dun

Dr. JOSEPH GEORGE, 100, 5A Cross Road, HIG Colony, RMV II Stage, Bangalore 560 094

New Forest, the campus of Forest Research Institute in Dehra Dun, UP was a good place to begin watching birds in the mid-1940s. Birds of the plains mingle there with birds of the Himalayas. Some of the sights and sounds still fresh in my memory from those early days are goldfinches on thistles, a flock of minivets flitting over some shrubbery hardly one metre above the ground, the laughter of white-crested laughing thrushes, and the penetrating song of the whistling thrush before sunrise. Bird life on the campus was so rich that in one year over 100 species were seen in or flying over a half hectare garden.

A flock of jungle babblers roosted on a conifer tree in this garden. The birds preferred a fairly open location but if it rained continuously for a few nights, they would move to another tree with denser foliage. After the rains stopped it would take them a few days again to return to the preferred location. This

flock fostered one or sometimes two young pied crested cuckoos in most seasons. The cuckoos would roost by themselves on an adjacent branch to the foster parents, but never with them.

The garden had no nesting sites for hole nesters. Magpie robin, blackheaded and common mynas, house and yellow-throated sparrows and five-striped palm squirrel nested in bamboo nestboxes put up on the young trees in the garden. It was amazing how blackheaded mynas could turn around in bamboo only 7.5 cm in internal diameter, in which they nested. Rollers showed interest in the nestboxes, but common mynas proved troublesome to them. Magpie robins always held their ground against the mynas. Observations made in one nesting season on 54 nestboxes of bamboo in New Forest are recorded in *Indian Forester*, 1958, Vol. 84, pp.687-692.

Bamboo is too tough a material for barbets to penetrate. So a 5 cm hole was cut in the wall of an internode of bamboo, the hole plugged with soft wood and the box put up on a tree. Green barbets cut open the plug but did not nest in the box. A note on this nestbox has been published in NLBW.

Hoopoes readily nested in an internode of bamboo with a hole in the septum (partition wall between nodes) at one end, placed horizontally and framed with bricks over a wall under the eaves of the house in the garden. The bamboo had a somewhat rectangular section. Whether a cylindrical bamboo would have been acceptable to the hoopoes and whether the brick framing was necessary are interesting questions. On the other hand the bamboo in the above nest site was probably quite superfluous !

A block of wood with a bottle shaped cavity scooped out of it and fixed to the ceiling of the garage was taken by house swifts. The open empty garage probably suggested a cave to the high flying swifts who, on coming down to investigate, would have seen the nestbox intended for redrumped swallows. It was always thrilling to watch the nesting swifts dive from great heights and shoot up to the nestbox in a graceful parabola. Swallows took such nestboxes installed elsewhere in New Forest.

Well made nestboxes of wood put up 15 years later to attract birds to a newly planted garden in Bangalore were all stolen !

An astonishing nesting site for a pair of purple sunbirds in New Forest was a chain attached to a flushing cistern in a bathroom. I was at the washbasin in the bathroom when I heard sunbirds behind me. Turning round, I saw the pair of purple sunbirds flying away from the chain. Seated comfortably in the bedroom with the door to the bathroom ajar I could watch the female sunbird construct her nest over a period of five days. After building a solid cone of the usual materials, attached to the chain, the bird plunged her head and shoulders into the middle of it to make a large hole through it. I remember my heart pounding when I grasped the significance of this action. What a simple method to make a hanging pouch ! Once the hole was made, the bird got into it and shook the bottom down to form the pouch. The hole to the rear was also closed. Detailed description of nest construction is given in JBNHS, 1958, Vol. 55, pp.420-428.

Large numbers of purple sunbirds nested in New Forest. Most of the nests were so oriented that the sitting sunbird faced the setting sun.



**B**elated though this manuscript is, for possible publication in the 40th Anniversary Issue of the Newsletter, it is my fond hope that it may be carried sometime later as the import of the item may have some impact on novice birdwatchers, who besides being flummoxed by the shapes, sizes, hues and ethology of birds, often find the scientific terminologies,

Another bird that seemed to prefer facing west was a rufous-backed shrike while roosting. Only one individual was observed for about ten nights roosting in a thorny *Rubus* bush about two metres above the ground. Every night the bird faced west although it had a choice of perches for roosting.

The greater part of New Forest extending to some 375 hectares could be described as a parkland. The distribution of magpie robins and black drongos in this area one summer was mapped by listening to their predawn song and calls respectively. Inspection during the day showed the presence of female magpie robins along with males in several of the sites where their song was heard before dawn. However all the sites were not inspected and it is not certain that all the males were paired. No attempt was made to ascertain whether each calling drongo represented a pair or not. The number of magpie robins heard before dawn was around 90, that is one bird in about four hectares. About the same number of black drongos were also heard calling before dawn.

The delayed reaction of babblers to changes in weather has been mentioned. The Himalayan whistling thrush was observed to be slow in recognising the progressive lengthening of the day after the winter solstice. The wake up call and song of the bird was heard about 20 minutes before sunrise, except when the sky was overcast, throughout November and till about December 22. That is, the call was heard later and later in the morning as sunrise became later. Then when sunrise became progressively earlier after the solstice, the thrush did not immediately respond to it. The interval between the bird's call and sunrise narrowed steadily, reached a minimum of about ten minutes and then slowly widened to the earlier 20 minutes by about January 15. It continued like that through February, but as the date for the bird's departure to the hills approached, the call was heard 30 minutes or more before sunrise.

Changes in the avifauna of New Forest with the changing seasons were quite striking. A count of the white wagtails seen on either side of the road on my way to work in the mornings showed that their number was maximum in spring and autumn suggesting that New Forest is on their migration route. (*Indian Forester*, 1961, Vol. 87, pp.572-575). Data for black drongos pointed to their status as partial migrants.

Do goldfinches visit New Forest now, I wonder. There is probably no room for thistles.



## The Making of a Birdwatcher

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binomials and checklists absolutely demoralising. My initiation into the avifaunal world came about through unusual events that transpired about 15 years ago.

Moving into my just bought new tilo-roofed home in the rain drenched city on the west coast, Mangalore, my eye caught sight of an ugly mass of bric-a-brac that I found

suspended from the door post just overhead. Closer observation, revealed it to be a nest of a kind, with two chicks. Bidding my family to leave the nest alone, I made a quick exit from the scene to my institute. Ministering to reluctant medical students in the formalin infused dissection hall, appeared a better option than hanging around a new home, with cement, paint, carpenters and masons raising dust and decibel. Returning for lunch, I noticed the dangling nest was missing. All questions on the mysterious disappearance, were answered, by all, masons and labour included, by a shake of their heads, and queer glances askance, the look signifying unspoken comments on my strange new love for birds. After the lot had repaired for their break, I sat down in the open verandah, when I noticed a tiny bird, chattering and muttering, flying to and fro. The mother bird! Agitated and alarmed. The sorties of the bird, appeared to revolve around a particular pillar at the northeast corner of the verandah. I checked the spot, where the bird had hovered again and again, even peering between the potted plants and crotons. The bird, however was adamant. It persisted, twittering and chirping, at that spot. It was then that I noticed the carpenter's tool bag. A cloth sack, tied at its mouth, standing against the pillar. With growing doubt, and trepidation, I opened the sack. Inside was a pink polythene disposable plastic bag, amidst awls, adzes and hammers. In this plastic pouch, stuffed, was the nest. I quickly retrieved the contents, finding one dead chick, and another barely alive. Much to the elation and euphoria of the mother hen, I carefully cupped the bundle of feathers in my palm, walked up to the compound wall, and released the ready-to-fly fledgling. Both baby and mother, hopped away into the thickets and shrubbery beyond.

Two things stood out in the cycle of events. One, the persistence with which the mother bird had indicated the site of the stolen nest to me, and the other, the confidence she had, in my interpreting her signals. Fascinated by bird ethology, I embarked on a serious study of birds, a pastime which over the years has developed into a passion; with over ten write-ups in the Newsletter, a book on Wildlife biology, convening of a workshop on avifauna, serving as State representative in the WWF-Karnataka, becoming life-member of the Ornithological Society of India, conducting nature camps for children at Bandipur and Muthodi, writing a checklist of Mangalore birds ... and to top it all, having the honour of being selected, after a series of interviews following an all-India advertisement, as the Executive Director of the Bombay Natural History Society, after Mr. J.C. Daniel's retirement (a post I passed up for personal reasons) and writing more than 56 articles on birds in newspapers!

Who would have guessed that a small purple sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*) would have opened so many doors, to so many pursuits and so many new friends. By the way, did I mention that the sunbird's chicks also put me into bird embryology, a science in which I completed my (Master of Surgery degree) Dissertation, and for which I received the Padmashri TMA Pai Gold Medal for original research....



Last evening, when I released an adult barn owl, handed over to me by a city resident, I felt a strange thrill that in some small way, I am giving back to nature, its own geno pool, besides schooling hundreds of cityfolk on the baselessness of their sinister theories on owls as harbingers of the evil eye. I also thank the Newsletter for giving hobby birders like me, a chance to share

experience and knowledge, not in scientific jargon and legalese, but in prose and common tongue. After all, the mother purple sunbird, did speak to me, not in any tongue I knew, but in universal language ... common system of communication that conveys, grief, sorrow, elation and alarm, decipherable to all living beings and creations.

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#### Presentation Features of Maimed Birds

In the decade since the WWF-India State Committee along with the Rotary Club, conducted a 'Workshop on Avifauna' in Mangalore, awareness of the need to conserve habitat and foster birdwatching, have grown quite remarkably. The southwest coast, though handicapped by the annual four-month deluge during the monsoons, is fairly fecund in its bird

life. A spin-off from the workshop has been the regular frequency with which distress phone calls are made to me, on 'how-to' and 'what-to-do' with a mobbed bird or two that has been found here and there, within and even outside the city. Often too, maimed, orphaned or trapped birds are brought home, for rehabilitation or nursing. A good percentage of such 'patients' are released on recovery. In the period cited, some odd modes of presentations of the avian patients, have intrigued me. A cinnamon bittern (*Ixobrychus cinnamomeus*), barely alive, that crashed into a hostel window pane, during a gusty monsoon night, a fully decapitated Indian robin (*Saxicoloides fulicata*), a dog-maimed green barbet (*Megalaima zeylanica*), a lame fledgeling pariah kite (*Milvus migrans*), a cat-bitten Indian pitta (*Pitta brachyura*), a brown hawk owl (*Ninox scutulata*) that crashed into a motorcyclist's helmet - needless to add, all the aforementioned birds were either dead or died soon after handing over. The most common

bird brought to me was the blue rock pigeon (*Columba livia*), most often with broken wing(s) through flying into ceiling fan blades. I am indebted to many readers of the Newsletter for educating me on the nuances of feeding and treatment of injured birds (in response to an earlier write-up of mine on the Mangalore mission).

Sixty two birds have been sent to me, of which 41 flew away after medical intervention and rehabilitation. In my series, owls, kites and crows recovered well, but pigeons, bulbuls and coppersmith barbets had high mortality rates.

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**P**rof Arunachalam Kumar's observations on kingfisher hunting in well (NLBW Vol. 39(4) July/August 1999) finally prompt me to write what I had been thinking of doing for the past one year. Prof. Kumar lives about 54 km from the town where I live, Karkala, and I am sure he may be able to observe and confirm what I am going to write here.

Economic progress and modernisation have a definite adverse effect on the environment around us. While it is reaching alarming proportions in various degrees in diverse habitats leading to disappearance or even local extinction of species, there are also subtle yet significant changes taking place which need not necessarily be for the worse. Certain species of animals and plants quickly adapt themselves to changing environment. I would like to share my observations on kingfishers (three spp) in my town.

My ancestral house is on the bank of a small irrigation tank called Anekere, which hosts, at any given time, over 30 species of birds, many of them breeding visitors. The tank is situated at the entrance of the town and is surrounded by orchards, coconut groves and paddyfields on one side and a busy main road on the other.

The tank has been a regular hunting ground for common, whitebreasted and storkbilled kingfishers and these could be seen throughout the year. However, I had been unable to locate their nests. They obviously bred somewhere nearby – as evidenced from the fledged young being fed on wing by the parents.

Last year in May I noticed a common kingfisher perched on the draw bar of one of the two wells in my backyard. It had a small fish in its beak. As I watched it for a while from a little distance away, it suddenly dived into the well. When I went to the well and peered over, the bird was nowhere to be seen. I

## Of Kingfishers and Wells

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was a bit apprehensive about its safety, but was eventually delighted to see it emerge from a hole on the side of the well about 1.5 m from ground level. Obviously it had a nest there and was feeding the young. I kept a watch on this nest and eventually had the satisfaction of seeing three young successfully emerge from the nest and clear out of the well. Since there were no dead chicks floating in the well water, it was apparent that there were no mishaps to this brood.

While watching the above nest I also discovered that another pair had been nesting in our second well which is about 25 m from the first one. Though I did not actually see the emergence of any brood, I am sure they too were successful, as I did not see any dead chicks in that well.

To my further delight the pair (was it the same?) at the first well nested again two months later and I could see the pair incubating in turns. Unfortunately this time heavy monsoon had set in and the rising well water came up much above the nest and as a consequence the eggs/chicks perhaps got drowned.

I made a survey of nearby wells in a radius of about 2-3 km and was rewarded by the discovery of a pair of storkbilled kingfishers nesting in the well in the nearby Mosque, a pair of whitebreasted kingfishers nesting in another well belonging to a private house not far away. I then spread the word in the neighbourhood asking anyone to inform me if they noticed any birds visiting their wells. Four people reported seeing kingfishers (they were quite familiar about the birds). We closely examined the wells and found the nest holes in each of them. Though I personally did not see it, my informants assured me that the birds were seen frequently flying into the wells. From their description I could gather that they were all whitebreasted kingfishers. So, our tally of kingfishers nesting in wells in that month (May) was – two pairs of common, one

pair of storkbilled and five pairs of whitebreasted within 2 km radius of the tank!

We did not actually see if any of these hunted in the wells at all, but as plenty of food was available in the tank as well as nearby paddy fields and wetlands, the birds perhaps had no need to feed on any fish in the wells.

What made these birds prefer nesting in the wells? Once again I made a reconnaissance of the nesting wells. All the wells seem to have one common factor - all of them had been fitted with electric immersible pumps for lifting water for domestic use. It was apparent that these days hardly anyone used the traditional pulley-and-rope method to draw well water

and any disturbance at wells seems to have been minimised except for occasional repair and maintenance of the pumps. The kingfishers perhaps learnt the advantage of safety as well as the soft and moistened mud walls of the well to tunnel their nests.

This could be a stray phenomenon restricted to one case/area only. On the other hand, it may be the case when similar ecological conditions prevail anywhere else. Again, it may also lead to more questions by discerning ornithologists. A close watch over a period of time may show some definite pattern in kingfisher behaviour, if any.



## Birds of Kihim - Dr. Salim Ali's Trail Revisited

ANISH P. ANDHERIA, 2, Sagar Building, V.P. Road, Andheri (West), Mumbai 400 058

I was invited by the Futehallys to visit them in Kihim on 7th November 1999. Kihim, with its long coastline studded with casurina is about 17 km., as the crow flies, from the Gateway of India, Mumbai. However, it is about 150 km., by road. I decided to take the much shorter waterway. The boat journey from the Gateway to Mandwa and then the bus journey from Mandwa to Chondi were smooth and scenic. From Chondi, Murad Manzil is three kilometers which I covered by the "ubiquitous" auto rickshaw. I had started at 7:45 hr. from the Gateway and reached Kihim beach at 9:30 hr.

Mr. Futehally has often written about his birding experiences at this place, which also happens to be the location where the late Dr. Salim Ali conducted his initial bird research on weaver birds.

After a customary warm reception by Mrs. Laeeq, Mr. Futehally and I headed for the trail. The birdlife in the region back in the fifties and sixties, I was told, was admirable owing to the combination of a tropical, moist and semi-evergreen forest, a vast undisturbed beach and thick mangrove swamps. Although, I knew that it would be foolish to expect to see it in its past glory, I allowed my optimism to override any reservations I had. In spite of the fact that the trail runs alongside a series of privately owned beach houses, it is still surprisingly lush and tranquil. Our trail commenced with the sighting of a black-naped monarch (black-naped blue flycatcher) searching for insects in the giant wood spider's web high up in a *Ficus bengalensis*. The coppersmith with its monotonous "puk-puk-puk" and the golden oriole with a much harsher "chirree" seemed to herald the fruiting of the banyan tree, which would provide them with vital nutrients throughout winter. The black drongo, an egoistic bird, tried its best to make its presence felt with a persistent "switch pik-pik". It too made the most of the banyan, probably picking tiny insects (wasps?) that come to lay their eggs in the ripened fruits.

The dark under-story naturally had its share of avian residents - spotted doves, red vented & red whiskered bulbuls, Eurasian chiffchaff and the common tailor bird. As we tried to

trace the inconspicuous chiffchaff in the dense undergrowth, the "switch-switch" of an Asian paradise flycatcher drew our attention to the neighbouring *Artocarpus heterophyllus*. It wasn't long before the short scurrying flights of this deft insect-hunter led us to its source. A single long white tail feather on this juvenile male indicated that the bird was about to step into adulthood. It would soon exuviate its rufous coloured plumage for a milky-white coat that will decorate it for life. The adult male paradise flycatcher is undisputedly one of the most impressive of Indian birds!

Further ahead Mr. Futehally pointed to a spot where he often saw the white-throated ground thrush and though he lamented the possible disappearance of this bird from Kihim, I was lucky to point out one later in the day. The sharp unmistakable "chichee" of the common (small blue) kingfisher as it jotted past us into the thick bamboo clump bordering a tiny man-made pond enabled us to locate it. Later, we saw the bird perched a few feet above the water surface. A placid Indian pond heron also watched this vibrant fisherman from the opposite bank, as it patiently waited for unwary fish to rise to the surface for a gulp of air.

High above the pond was a flock of barn (common) swallows surveying the air for hightlying insects that rise with the afternoon heat. They seemed to enjoy the tropical sun after a long, laborious journey from the chilling temperate zones of the north. Within no time, the swallows were replaced by a bunch of resident Asian palm swifts possibly irritated, for having to accommodate the ever-increasing migrant swallow populations!

Just then, an unusual rumbling sound accompanied by a foul odor affected our senses. The sound emanated from an illicit brewery that was set up near the pond. The foul smelling effluent was being dumped into the pond causing acute eutrophication. What an irony - the algae thrives on high levels of organic waste but in the bargain chokes life out of the aquatic fauna, thereby depleting the very food source on which the birds survive. It is sad but true that such distilleries have

mushroomed within many wildlife reserves in Maharashtra, providing easy money to the poor, who neither know nor care about the countless lives it affects, both human and animal alike!

Disgusted and helpless, we moved-on. A pair of purple-rumped sunbirds with their sorties for nectar and pollen was a welcome sight. Soon we reached the fringe of the forest and into the mangroves, which supported its own characteristic birdlife. Shoals of tiny fish and crabs converge in these amphibious forests to forage on the nutritious soup of decaying leaves. Green sandpipers, red wattled lapwings, cattle and little egrets in turn were seen feasting on this abundant fauna. A solitary black-shouldered (black-winged) kite was spotted amongst a few bolsterous black (pariah) kites that seemed to be involved in a mock combat. The "trilling" calls of the (little) green bee-eaters filled the air.

We had already walked more than an hour and it was time for us to return. We reached a patch of ground engulfed in *Lantana camara* and *Salvadora persica*. While we flushed out a flock of chestnut-tailed (grey-headed) myna from within the *Lantana* shrub, the bold house sparrows continued their assault on this juicy delicacy. Then we were on the beach to try our luck at some waders that visit the western shores of India during this time of the year. We were welcomed by a flock of twelve red shanks that were surprisingly lazing around. In contrast a solitary common sandpiper capitalized on the receding tide by pecking incessantly at tiny invertebrates. Just then, my eyes lit-up at the sight of that most elegant bird of prey - the white-bellied fish (sea) eagle effortlessly flying past the *Casuarina* trees. The huge grey bill and the pied underbody against the deep blue winter sky has left an unforgettable impression. We kept gazing at the sky even after the bird had long vanished. The presence of this tertiary predator (an indicator of the health of our estuaries and seashores) in the area had suddenly raised our spirits and we were more optimistic about the fate of this fragile ecosystem.

Back into the forest, the spell was broken only by the "chirups" of the common lora busily searching for grubs in a *Mangifera indica*. The calls of the plum-headed (blossom headed) and rose-ringed parakeets echoed in the background. At the 'Manzil', a lovely meal, awaited me, but after the meal I headed straight for the beach for some more bird watching!

It was 14.00 hr. but the beach was as busy as ever. Scores of Kentish plovers, common red shanks and green shanks, Terek and common sandpipers kept me company. Far away to the south, a huge flock of common black headed gulls (more than 150) were enjoying an afternoon siesta. On a closer look, I could also spot some gull-billed as well as little terns sitting alongside their larger cousins. Most surprisingly, I saw a Eurasian hoopoe probing in the wet sand for grubs (probably crabs). On my way back, I also stumbled upon a solitary low-flying ruddy turnstone, which has a somewhat labored flight in comparison to the other shorebirds. By the time I returned Mr. Futchally was ready to take me to the Kihim pond where Dr. Salim Ali had carried out his world famous research on the baya weavers.

The *Acacia arabica* that supported Dr. Ali's bayas has long been chopped. The village men supposedly pay Rs. 80,000/- per annum to the government for allowing them to fish in the pond and therefore treat it as their own property leaving very little room for the birds. The pond was once inhabited by 35 species of birds including both species of jacanas, cotton teals, pied kingfishers, Eurasian marsh harriers, common moorhens, white-breasted waterhens, etc. It is very distressing to see its current state. However, inspite of the pollution and disturbance we were happy to see a white wagtail, couple of red wattled lapwings, a solitary little cormorant and a common kingfisher, perched on a central cement podium that juts out from the water. With all the floating vegetation gone, the birds are compelled to take refuge on man-made structures! Suddenly, a flock of over 100 common swallows appeared on the scene and one by one plunged into the pond for a refreshing bath before the night.

Not far away from the pond, along the tar road, we came across a signboard that read "Spotless Pest Control". In fact, the entire roadway from Mandwa to Kihim had these advertisements. Although it was directed at ridding us of insect pests there synthetic pesticides are a major cause of our ecological problem. After a thoroughly refreshing day I embarked upon the return journey reaching Chondi at 17:30 hr. and the Gateway at 20:00 hr.

#### Appendix - I

The semi-evergreen forest at Kihim harbors trees like *Tectona grandis*, *Ficus bengalensis*, *F. religiosa*, *F. racemosa*, *Syzygium cumini*, *Pongamia pinnata*, *Thespesia populnea*, *Bombax malabaricum*, *Erythrina indica*, *Mitragyna parvifolia*, *Adina cordifolia*, *Schleichera oleosa*, *Tamanindus indica*, *Spathodea campanulata*, *Butea monosperma*, *Cassia fistula*, *Grewia tiliaefolia*, *Holarrhena antidysenterica*, *Caryota urens*, *Borassus flabellifer*, *Acacia arabica*, Bamboo etc., while the seashore is lined with *Cesueraria equisetifolia* and *Cocos nucifera*. Some of the shrubs include *Helicteres isora*, *Capparis sp.*, *Cornya sp.*, *Ziziphus sp.*, *Lantana camara*, *Salvadora persica* and *Ipomea sp.* among others. *Avicennia sp.* is the main stay as far as the mangroves are concerned.

#### Appendix II :

The birds seen at Kihim on 7th November 1999 are as follows :

1. Black-rumped flameback *Dinopium benghalense*; 2. Coppersmith barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*; 3. Eurasian hoopoe *Upupa epops*; 4. Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*; 5. Common kingfisher *Alcedo atthis*; 6. White-throated kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*; 7. Green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*; 8. Asian koel *Eudynamys scolopacea*; 9. Rose-ringed parakeet *Psittacula krameri*; 10. Plum hooded parakeet *Psittacula cyanocephala*; 11. Asian palm swift *Cypsiurus balasiensis*; 12. Rock pigeon *Columba livia*; 13. Spotted dove *Streptopelia chinensis*; 14. Common greenshank *Tringa nebularia*; 15. Common redshank *Tringa totanus*; 16. Ruddy turnstone *Arenaria interpres*; 17. Green sandpiper *Tringa ochropus*; 18. Common sandpiper *Tringa hypoleucos*; 19. Terek sandpiper *Tringa brevipes*; 20. Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*; 21. Little ringed plover *Charadrius dubius*; 22. Red-wattled lapwing *Vanellus indicus*; 23. Great black-headed gull *Larus ichthyaetus*.

24. Common black-headed gull *Larus ridibundus*; 25. Gull-billed tern *Sterna nilotica*; 26. Little tern *Sterna albifrons*; 27. Black-shouldered kite *Elanus caeruleus*; 28. Black kite *Milvus migrans*; 29. Brahminy kite *Haliastur indus*; 30. White-bellied fish-eagle *Haliaeetus leucogaster*; 31. Little cormorant *Phalacrocorax niger*; 32. Little egret *Egretta garzetta*; 33. Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*; 34. Indian pond heron *Ardeola grayii*; 35. Western reef egret *Egretta gularis*; 36. Golden-fronted leafbird *Chloropsis aurifrons*; 37. House crow *Corvus splendens*; 38. Large-billed crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*; 39. Eurasian golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus*; 40. Black-headed oriole *Oriolus xanthornus*; 41. Black drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*; 42. Asian paradise flycatcher *Teresiphone paradisi*; 43. Common iora *Aegithina tiphia*; 44. White-throated ground thrush *Zoothera citrina cyanotus*; 45. Verditer flycatcher *Muscicapa thalassina*; 46. Tickell's blue flycatcher *Cyornis tickelliae*; 47. Black-naped monarch *Hypothymis azurea*; 48. Indian robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*; 49. Chestnut-tailed starling *Sturnus malabaricus*; 50. Common myna *Acridotheres tristis*; 51. Jungle myna *Acridotheres fuscus*; 52. Barn swallow *Hirundo rustica*; 53. Red-rumped swallow *Hirundo daurica*; 54. Red-whiskered bulbul *Pycnonotus jocosus*; 55. Red-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*; 56. Ashy prinia *Prinia socialis*; 57. Common tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*; 58. Eurasian chiffchaff *Phylloscopus collybita*; 59. Greenish warbler *Phylloscopus trochiloides*; 60. Purple-rumped sunbird *Nectarinia zeylonica*; 61. House sparrow *Passer domesticus*; 62. White wagtail *Motacilla alba*; 63. Baya weaver *Ploceus philippinus*.



## Migratory Birds at Lingambudhi Lake in Mysore

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Water bodies comprising numerous lakes and tanks constitute important habitats for wetland birds all over India. Karnataka state is unique in having thousands of irrigation tanks, the man-made reservoirs or lakes in order to conserve rain water. Something like 43,000 tanks or lakes offer feeding and resting areas for many species of wetland birds - both resident as well as migratory. Lingambudhi lake situated in the outskirts of Mysore was built a hundred and fifty seven years ago (1842) by the Mysore Wodeyars for irrigating lands around the village Lingambudhi Palya.

We have been surveying the birds in this lake for the last ten years. Our observations show that it is home to at least 276 species of birds including the important winter visitors. Since the lake was under threat as the city expanded, concerned birdwatchers and environmentalists, with the help of the forest department, were able to improve the habitat and, by creating small islands surrounded by water, provide a safe place for winter ducks. The trees planted on these islands (*Acacia*, *Sesbania*) provide roosting sites for resident water birds like cormorants, storks, herons and egrets. It is now a breathtaking sight to observe wintering long-distance migrants comprising at least 121 species representing 29 families (Table 1). The migratory birds start arriving as early as August comprising mainly waders, followed by ducks in September and October, their numbers peaking in December and January. On an average one can count upto 5,000 ducks representing ten species and 600 waders of 26 species. We have counted up to 25,000 ducks (JAN '98) and 4,000 waders (MAR '98) on a single day. It is a grand spectacle to watch the ducks descending on the lake and taking off en masse.

The distribution of various species of ducks in the lake shows a distinct pattern of association, the shovellers, garganeys and wigeons preferring the shallow waters while the pochards are found in the deep waters. The waders are confined to the mudflats, fringes of the lake and the adjoining paddy fields. As waterfowl count decreases with the advancing

summer, the number of waders increase dramatically. During the dry summer season and when there is inadequate rains of the monsoon, the entire lake transforms itself into a large mudflat attracting waders. Of the 26 species of waders recorded here, important and rare ones include the Terek sandpiper, the ruddy turnstone, the pied avocet and the common ringed plover. When such a wonderful array of birds congregate, raptors complete the picture of the seasonal spectacle. Out of the 25 species of raptors recorded, 11 are winter visitors. Rare sightings include that of the greater spotted eagle, the hen harrier and the peregrine falcon. Warblers are confined to the fringes where reed beds grow adjoining the paddy fields and the grassy edges. 21 species of warblers have been recorded from here, 16 being winter visitors including the Pallas' grasshopper warbler, a rare sighting (Table 1). A large number of egrets (up to 3000) mynas and rosy pastor (up to 10000) regularly utilize the lands for roosting. Other significant records from the lake include the greater flamingo, Indian reef heron, the black capped kingfisher, the great black headed gull, the little tern, the common tern, the short-eared owl and the wryneck. This tank till recently was outside the city limits of Mysore, but with the expansion of the city, is now a part of the suburbs and consequently faces the twin threats of pollution and drying up due to loss of catchment areas. Birdwatchers and environmentalists of Mysore have been pressing the authorities to protect the lake from contamination by sewage. Further, there has been a move to construct a 'ringroad' to pass through the lake, which if allowed, is a death knell for our guests from far-away lands that winter here. This wonderful spot cries for attention and needs to be conserved. It could serve as a great birding site for city dwellers as well as for eager birders.

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Table 1

#### CHECKLIST OF BIRDS WINTERING AT OR PASSING THROUGH LINGAMBUDHI LAKE

C - Common; O - Occasional; R - Rare; V - Vagrant; P - Passage migrant.

SI No.	Common Name	Scientific Name	Status
<b>FAMILY : DENDROCYGNIDAE (TREE - DUCKS)</b>			
1.	Lesser whistling teal	<i>Dendrocygna javanica</i>	C
<b>FAMILY : ANATIDAE (DUCKS)</b>			
2.	Cotton teal / Cotteri pygmy-goose	<i>Nettapus cochinellarius</i>	O
3.	Garganey / Grey winged teal	<i>Anas querquedula</i>	C
4.	Common teal / Green - winged teal	<i>Anas crecca</i>	O
5.	Eurasian wigeon	<i>A. penelope</i>	O
6.	Gadwall	<i>A. strepera</i>	R
7.	Northam shoveler	<i>A. clypeata</i>	C
8.	Northern pintail	<i>A. acuta</i>	C
9.	Common pochard	<i>Aythya ferina</i>	C
10.	Ferruginous pochard	<i>A. nyroca</i>	R
<b>FAMILY : PICIDAE (WOODPECKERS)</b>			
11.	Eurasian wryneck	<i>Jynx torquilla</i>	V
<b>FAMILY : CORACIIDAE (ROLLERS)</b>			
12.	European roller	<i>Coracias garrulus</i>	V/P
<b>FAMILY : DACELONIDAE (HALCYON KINGFISHERS)</b>			
13.	Black-capped kingfisher	<i>Halcyon pileata</i>	V
<b>FAMILY : MEROPIDAE (BEE-EATERS)</b>			
14.	Chestnut headed bee-eater	<i>Merops leschenaultii</i>	O
15.	Blue tailed bee-eater	<i>M. philippinus</i>	C
<b>FAMILY : CUCULIDAE (CUCKOOS)</b>			
16.	Indian cuckoo	<i>Cuculus micropterus</i>	O
<b>FAMILY : STRIGIDAE (OWLS)</b>			
17.	Short eared owl	<i>Asio flammeus</i>	V
<b>FAMILY : RALLIDAE (RAILS, CRAKES)</b>			
18.	Baillon's crake	<i>Porzana pusilla</i>	R
<b>FAMILY : SCOLOPACIDAE (SNIPES)</b>			
19.	Common/fantail snipe	<i>Gallinago gallinago</i>	O
20.	Pintail snipe	<i>G. stenura</i>	C
21.	Jack snipe	<i>G. media</i>	R
<b>FAMILY : TRINGIDAE (SANDPIPER)</b>			
22.	Eurasian curlew	<i>Numenius arquata</i>	R
23.	Black-tailed godwit	<i>Limosa limosa</i>	O
24.	Spotted redshank	<i>Tringa erythropus</i>	V
25.	Common redshank	<i>T. totanus</i>	C
26.	Marsh sandpiper	<i>T. stagnatilis</i>	C
27.	Common greenshank	<i>T. nebularia</i>	C
28.	Green sandpiper	<i>T. ochropus</i>	C
29.	Spotted sandpiper	<i>T. glareola</i>	C
30.	Terek sandpiper	<i>T. cinerea / T. terek</i>	V/P
31.	Common sandpiper	<i>T. hypoleucus</i>	C
32.	Ruddy turnstone	<i>Arenaria interpres</i>	V
33.	Little stint	<i>Calidris minuta</i>	C
34.	Temminck's stint	<i>C. temminckii</i>	C

35.	Curlew-sandpiper	<i>C. ferruginea</i>	O/P
36.	Ruff	<i>Philomachus pugnax</i>	O
<b>FAMILY : ROTSRATULIDAE (PAINTED SNIPE)</b>			
37.	Greater painted snipe	<i>Rostratula benghalensis</i>	O
<b>FAMILY : CHARADRIIDAE (POLOVERS)</b>			
38.	Black winged stilt	<i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	C
39.	Pied avocet	<i>Recurvirostra avosetta</i>	V
40.	Grey plover	<i>Pluvialis squatarola</i>	V
41.	Pacific golden plover	<i>Pluvialis dominica</i>	O
42.	Common ringed plover	<i>Charadrius hiaticula</i>	V
43.	Little ringed plover	<i>C. dubius</i>	G
44.	Kentish plover	<i>C. alexandrinus</i>	C
45.	Mongolian plover/ Lesser sand plover	<i>C. mongolus</i>	R/P
<b>FAMILY : GLAREOLIDAE (PRATINCOLES)</b>			
46.	Small pratincole	<i>Glareola lactea</i>	V
<b>FAMILY : LARIDAE (GULLS, TERNS)</b>			
47.	Great black-headed gull	<i>Larus ichthyaetus</i>	V
48.	Brown headed gull	<i>L. brunneicollis</i>	O
49.	Black headed gull	<i>L. ridibundus</i>	R
50.	Whiskered tern	<i>Chlidonias hybridus</i>	C
51.	Gull billed tern	<i>Sterna nilotica</i>	O
52.	River tern	<i>S. aurantia</i>	C
53.	Common tern	<i>S. hirundo</i>	V
54.	Blackbelled tern	<i>S. acuticauda</i>	C
55.	Little tern	<i>S. albifrons</i>	V
<b>FAMILY : ACCIPITRIDAE (HAWKS, EAGLES, VULTURES)</b>			
56.	Long-legged buzzard	<i>Buteo rufinus</i>	R
57.	Bonelli's eagle	<i>Hieraetus fasciatus</i>	V
58.	Booted hawk eagle	<i>Hieraetus pennatus</i>	O
59.	Greater spotted eagle	<i>Aquila clanga</i>	O
60.	Black eagle	<i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>	V
61.	Hen harrier/ Northern harrier	<i>Circus cyaneus</i>	V
62.	Pale harrier / Pallid harrier	<i>C. macrourus</i>	O
63.	Western marsh-harrier	<i>C. aeruginosus</i>	C
64.	Osprey	<i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	R
<b>FAMILY : FALCONIDAE (FALCONS)</b>			
65.	Peregrine falcon	<i>Falco peregrinus / F. peregrinus</i>	V
66.	Kestrel	<i>F. tinunculus</i>	O
<b>FAMILY : ARDEIDAE (HERONS, EGRETS)</b>			
67.	Indian reef heron/ Western reef-egret	<i>Egretta gularis</i>	V
68.	Yellow bittern	<i>Ixobrychus sinensis</i>	O
69.	Chestnut bittern	<i>I. cinnamomeus</i>	R
<b>FAMILY : PHOENICOPTERIDAE (FLAMINGOS)</b>			
70.	Greater flamingo	<i>Phoenicopterus roseus</i>	V
<b>FAMILY : THRESKIORNITHIDAE (IBISES, SPOONBILLS)</b>			
71.	Glossy ibis	<i>Pseudibis pallidus</i>	O
72.	Eurasian spoonbill	<i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	C
<b>FAMILY : CICONIIDAE (STORKS)</b>			
73.	Asian openbill	<i>Anastomus oscitans</i>	R
74.	Woolly-necked (Whistling) stork	<i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	O
<b>FAMILY : PITTIIDAE (PITTAS)</b>			
75.	Indian pitta	<i>Pitta brachyura</i>	R
<b>FAMILY : LANIIDAE (SHRIKES)</b>			
76.	Brown shrike	<i>Lanius cristatus</i>	C
<b>FAMILY : CORVIDAE (CROWS, DRONGOS, ORIOLES)</b>			
77.	Ashy swallow-shrike	<i>Artamus fuscus</i>	O
78.	Eurasian golden oriole	<i>Oriolus oriolus kundoo</i>	C
79.	Rosy minivet	<i>Pericrocotus roseus</i>	V

80.	Black drongo	<i>Dicrurus macrocercus</i>	C	120.	Brown rock pipit / Large-billed pipit	<i>A. stans</i>	O
81.	White bellied drongo	<i>D. caerulescens</i>	R	121.	Tawny pipit	<i>A. campestris</i>	O
82.	Grey / ashy drongo	<i>D. leucophaeus</i>	R	122.	Common roselinch	<i>Carpodacus erythrinus</i>	R
83.	Asian paradise flycatcher	<i>Terpsiphone paradisi</i>	O				
<b>FAMILY : MUSCICAPIDAE (THRUSHES, FLYCATCHERS, CHATS)</b>							
84.	Asian brown flycatcher	<i>Muscicapa latreillii</i>	C				
85.	Brown breasted flycatcher	<i>M. dauurica</i>					
86.	Red-breasted flycatcher	<i>M. mutul</i>	WP				
87.	Blue throat	<i>M. parva</i>	O				
88.	Black redstart	<i>Erythacus rubecula</i>	O				
89.	Siberian stonechat / Collared bushchat	<i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	R				
90.	Black bird	<i>Scixia torquata / S. meura</i>	R				
91.		<i>Turdus merula</i>	V				
<b>FAMILY : STURNIDAE (STARLINGS)</b>							
91.	a) Chestnut tailed starling / Grey headed myna	<i>Sturnus malabaricus</i>	C				
	b) White headed	<i>S. malabaricus blythii</i>	R				
	Race of (a)						
92.	Brahminy starling	<i>S. pagodarum</i>	C				
93.	Rosy starling	<i>S. roseus</i>	O				
<b>FAMILY : HIRUNDINIDAE (SWALLOWS)</b>							
94.	Barn swallow / common swallow	<i>Hirundo rustica</i>	C				
95.	Wire tailed swallow	<i>H. smithii</i>	O				
96.	Striated swallow / Red-rumped swallow	<i>M. daurica</i>	C				
97.	House martin	<i>Delichon urbica</i>	V				
98.	Streak-throated swallow / Indian cliff swallow	<i>H. ruficola</i>	V				
<b>FAMILY : SYLVIIDAE (WARBLERS)</b>							
99.	Franklin's wren-warbler	<i>Prinia hodgsonii</i>	O				
100.	Grasshopper warbler	<i>Locustella naevia</i>	O				
101.	Pallas' grasshopper warbler / Pallas' warbler	<i>L. certhiola</i>	V				
102.	Thickbilled warbler	<i>Acrocephalus aegion</i>	O				
103.	Indian great reed warbler / Clemnorous reed-warbler	<i>A. stentoreus</i>	C				
104.	Blyth's reed warbler	<i>A. dumetorum</i>	C				
105.	Paddy field warbler	<i>A. agricola</i>	O				
106.	Booted warbler	<i>Hippolais olivetorum</i>	C				
107.	Orphean warbler	<i>Sylvia borin</i>	R				
108.	Lesser white throat	<i>S. curruca</i>	C				
	(I) althea (II) mirella						
109.	Eurasian chiff-chaff / Brown leaf warbler	<i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	O				
110.	Ticelli's leaf warbler	<i>P. sibilatrix</i>	R				
111.	Plain leaf warbler / Inornate warbler	<i>P. inornatus</i>	C				
112.	Olivaceous leaf warbler / Sulphurbellied warbler	<i>P. griseolus</i>	O				
113.	Dull green leaf warbler / Greenish warbler	<i>P. occipitalis</i>	C				
<b>FAMILY : PASSERIDAE</b>							
114.	White wagtail / Pied wagtail	<i>Motacilla alba</i>	R				
		<i>dukhunensis</i>					
115.	Yellowheaded wagtail / Citrine wagtail	<i>M. citreola</i>	R				
116.	Yellow wagtail	<i>M. flava</i>					
	(a) Blackheaded race	<i>M. flava melanogaster</i>	O				
	(b) Blusheaded race	<i>M. flava balearica</i>	C				
	(c) Greyheaded race	<i>M. flava thunbergi</i>	C				
117.	Grey wagtail	<i>M. cinerea</i>	C				
118.	Indian tree pipit / Olive-backed pipit	<i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>	R				
119.	Richard's pipit	<i>A. novaeseelandiae</i>	R				
		<i>richardii</i>					
<b>Resident Wetland Birds at Lingambudhi Lake</b>							
	<b>Sl. No.</b>	<b>Common name</b>	<b>Scientific Name</b>	<b>Status</b>			
<b>FAMILY : ANATIDAE (DUCKS)</b>							
01.	Spotted duck		<i>Anas poecilorhyncha</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : ALCEDINIDAE (KINGFISHERS)</b>							
02.	Common kingfisher		<i>Alcedo atthis</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : DACELONIDAE (HALCYON KINGFISHERS)</b>							
03.	White breasted / White throated kingfisher		<i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : CERYLIDAE (RED KINGFISHERS)</b>							
04.	Pied kingfisher		<i>Ceryle rudis</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : RALLIIDAE (RAILS, CRAKES, COOTS)</b>							
05.	Blue breasted banded rail / Slatyhead rail		<i>Rallus strigosus</i>	R			
06.	Ruddy / ruddy breasted crake		<i>Porzana fusca</i>	O			
07.	Brown crake		<i>Ansaromis akool</i>	O			
08.	White breasted water hen		<i>A. phasianella</i>	C			
09.	Common moorhen		<i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	C			
10.	Purple moorhen / Purple swamp hen		<i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	C			
11.	Common coot		<i>Fulica atra</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : JACANIDAE (JACANAS)</b>							
12.	Pheasant-tailed jacana		<i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>	C			
13.	Bronze-winged jacana		<i>Metopidius indicus</i>	O			
<b>FAMILY : ANHINGIDAE (DARTERS)</b>							
14.	Oriental darter		<i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : PHALACROCORACIDAE (CORMORANTS)</b>							
15.	Great cormorant / Large cormorant		<i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	C			
16.	Indian cormorant (Indian shag)	<i>P. fuscicollis</i>					
17.	Little cormorant	<i>P. niger</i>					
<b>FAMILY : ARDEIDAE (HERONS, EGRETS)</b>							
18.	Grey heron		<i>Ardea cinerea</i>	C			
19.	Purple heron		<i>A. purpurea</i>	C			
20.	Indian pond heron		<i>Ardeola grayii</i>	C			
21.	Cattle egret		<i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	C			
22.	Large egret / Great egret		<i>Ardea alba</i>	C			
23.	Intermediate egret / Smaller egret		<i>Egretta intermedia</i>	C			
24.	Little egret		<i>Egretta garzetta</i>	C			
25.	Black-crowned night heron		<i>Nycticorax nycticorax</i>	O			
<b>FAMILY : THRESKIORNITHIDAE (IBISES)</b>							
26.	White ibis / Blackheaded ibis		<i>Threskiornis melanocephalus / T. bisehiopica</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : PELECANIDAE (PELICANS)</b>							
27.	Spot-billed pelican		<i>Pelecanus philippensis</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : CICONIIDAE (STORKS)</b>							
28.	Painted stork		<i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	C			
<b>FAMILY : CISTICOLIDAE (WREN-WARBLERS)</b>							
29.	Streaked fantail warbler / Zitting cisticola		<i>Cisticola juncidis</i>	C			





## Birdwatching from Lalpuri Reservoir to Crissy Field

WILLIAM C SELOVER, 1257 Union Street, San Francisco, California 94109, USA

**M**y first and only contribution to the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* appeared as a jointly bylined article, written mostly by my co-author KS Lavkumar, published (or should I say cyclostyled) in the May 1963 issue of the Newsletter's Vol.3. In it, we described a late-March outing of amateur birdwatchers from Rajkot City to the nearby Lalpuri Reservoir – during which we observed a variety of waterside birds – both resident and migratory.

It was nearly three years earlier, however, when I first became acquainted with the *Newsletter*. It was during the summer of 1960 when I was in India as an exchange student from Massachusetts and lucky enough to find myself in the generous hospitality of Laeeq and Zafar Futehally, then living in their charming Juhu Lane home in Andheri – the lovely cottage opening into an expansive garden designed by Lacoq to attract all manner of bird life (a setting more recently memorialized in *Tara Lane*, the widely honored first novel by Shama Futehally).

In the summer of 1960 the *Newsletter* was only six months old, the first edition of *About Indian Birds* by Lacoq Futehally and her uncle Sallim Ali was fairly new on the bookstore shelves, and, looking back, it seems to me that the combination of these two publications appearing at this moment in the history of India's modern environmental movement represented a signal development in the popular understanding of the utterly indispensable role birds play in the earth's fragile ecosystem. In the introduction to *About Indian Birds*, the authors state: "Birds are an integral part of the whole system of life on this earth. They are necessary in the same way that soil and plants and animals are necessary." For forty years now the *Newsletter for Birdwatchers* has faithfully observed that tenet.

I was reminded of the Lalpuri Reservoir outing recently during my daily walk along the San Francisco Bay – along a two mile shoreline stretch from Marina Green to Fort Point at the base of the southern span of the Golden Gate Bridge. For more than a century, this Golden Gate headland has been part of a spectacular piece of heavily forested property occupied by the Presidio of San Francisco – an Army base whose military origins extend back to the days of the Spanish royal land grants. With the end of the Cold War and the shrinkage of the US military, and, in a stroke of enlightened public policy planning, this property recently became the only urban US National Park – on par with Yellowstone and Yosemite – called the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA). It's as if the whole of the Malabar Hill peninsula in Bombay had been reserved for centuries – and then transformed into a National Park.

Civic-minded individuals formed the Golden Gate National Parks Association, the official non-profit affiliate of the GGNRA, determined to contribute to the intelligent conversion of the

military base to a true preserve for nature and a site for healthy recreation. Progress toward this end has been encouraging.

When I began my walks along that stretch of the Bay a decade or so ago, the footpath route was a mixed blessing. The views of Golden Gate Bridge and across the Bay to Alcatraz and Angel Islands and into the distance to Mount Tamalpais were spectacular. But on the land side, my walk was dominated by abandoned acres of concrete and asphalt airport runways – Crissy Field – built for light military planes and flanked by corrugated steel hangers and used until recently only by military helicopters. Toxic runoff from fuels and oils had saturated the soils for decades, the original coastal sand dunes had shrunk to a few yards of sadly neglected shoreline, the wetlands had disappeared under the paving, and migratory birds that had for centuries used the shoreline here for their spring and fall feedings had long since disappeared.

Then, as a result of the Association's work – and its exceptional fundraising efforts – something quite promising began to happen, beginning in September 1998. The Association had already raised \$25 million (in private donations) of the \$27 million needed, and work commenced to restore the 100-acre plot, remove the asphalt landing strip, razo buildings, clean up the toxic waste, install a 30-acre tidal lagoon, rebuild the sand dunes and replant native grasses and wildflowers. It is to be completed in mid-2000.

For those of us using the walking trail during this construction period (with the workers carefully accommodating us with useable detours whenever the giant earth-moving equipment needed rights-of-way for the restoration project), the transformation has been remarkable. Even more encouraging has been nature's response. With the restoration not even two-thirds finished, the return of more than 60 species of birds has been recorded at the site – about one third of them wetland obligates, the shorebirds, herons, waterfowl, terns and the like. There are the dowitchers, sandpipers and avocets, all making themselves at home probing the black mud shore of the not-yet-completed lagoon for nutritious invertebrates. With the bulldozers still churning away at the site, killdeers and dunlins have reappeared.

A wildlife and fisheries specialist with the Park Service, affably named Daphne Hatch, recently told an interviewer: "We're pretty amazed at the level of bird use we've already seen. It's exciting that we're seeing so many shore birds. Some of them, like dunlins, haven't been seen in this part of the bay for decades. There just wasn't the habitat they needed – mud and sand flats."

Soon the dike surrounding the lagoon will be opened to the bay, initiating a true tidal marsh system – with its anticipated proliferation of estuarine invertebrates and fish. As a result, Ms Hatch predicts that the number and variety of shorebirds

will continue to rise through the fall and winter as they migrate from Alaska and Canada. In addition to the creation of a tidal marsh, several acres of dune land and beach have already been planted with more than 20,000 seedlings and slips of native grasses and shrubs – out of nearly 400,000 native plants which will ultimately shelter indigenous songbirds and other wildlife at this shoreline park.

Of course, nothing in this bay-side restoration will ever compare with the “moving freeze of flamingos” we observed nearly 40 years ago feeding at the Lalpuri Reservoir. But for some of us, the anticipation of new discoveries of this refurbished fold of land leading to the entrance of the San Francisco Bay offers a nearly comparable prospect. Already, just thirty miles north of the Golden Gate, a Curlew sandpiper was recently sighted at Bolinas Lagoon in Marin County. Here

is a bird that breeds in a small area of northern Russia and usually winters in habitats ranging from central Africa through Southeast Asia to Australia – and is not even supposed to be in California. Even rarer, a White-winged tern spent the month of September south of the San Francisco Bay on Elkhorn Slough in Monterey County, only the second recorded sighting in California. Both events caused great excitement among the area’s birdwatchers. And both events offer hope that someday such sightings may be commonplace at Crissy Field – at this restored strip of land reclaimed after two centuries from the prerogatives of human warfare.

For more on the Crissy Field restoration, check out the World Wide Web: [www.nps.gov/goga/crissyp.htm](http://www.nps.gov/goga/crissyp.htm)

## REVIEWS

**BEFRIENDING BIRDS. DOSTEE KARU YA PAKSHANSHI (LET US MAKE FRIENDS WITH BIRDS).** KIRAN PURANDARE, Centre for Environmental Education, Pune

Written in easy, flowing Marathi this is an excellent introduction to the birds of Maharashtra. It describes in some detail 50 common species and mentions in passing an equal number of others. There are 52 colour illustrations and some 100 black and white sketches, all of good quality. An introductory section acquaints us with morphology of the birds, their place in nature, and how to set about watching them. A concluding section adds a number of interesting bird anecdotes, describes bird habitats and gives hints on how to set down observations on birds that may be communicated, names and addresses of experts on birds from Maharashtra and a bibliography of Marathi bird literature. At the back are two maps of Maharashtra, one with locations of sanctuaries, national parks, heronries and other sites of interest, and another with district boundaries inviting the readers to record their observations. An altogether excellent effort by the author, the artists, the editors and publishers. This attractive little book should draw many more young Maharashtrians, especially from rural areas to the fascinating world of birds.

Madhav Gadgil



**THE DANCE OF THE SARUS. ESSAYS OF A WANDERING NATURALIST.** THEODORE BASKARAN, O.U.P. 240 Pages, Rs. 295

Theodore Baskaran was born to be a naturalist. His childhood was spent in Dharapuram in Tamil Nadu and we learn that “when (he) was not in a classroom, (he) was either in the river or up in one of the *kudar seetha* trees” although many young people who love being out in the open, do not have a passionate interest in the natural world. By the time he was an adult he had absorbed a considerable amount of authentic knowledge about his surroundings. This serious interest was put to good use wherever he was forced to “wander” during his postings as a civil servant.

The book under review consists of several well defined sections - Birds, Mammals, Habitats, Issues, and a section on domestic creatures. I will confine myself to the section on birds which contains much information in which readers of the Newsletter will be interested. Being such a good observer he has always something significant to say about the behaviour or habitat or history of the species being described.

While writing about the sarus crane in the glowing terms which the bird merits, he remarks that because of the disappearance of wetlands (the prime need of the bird) they have begun to nest in paddy fields, which are temporary wetlands, and as a result they come into conflict with farmers who resent the damage done to their crops. Apparently the Kheda area of Gujarat was once the favoured habitat of these cranes, but the population of nesting pairs has decreased by as much as 15 per cent in recent years.

In the world of birds which are so transient and mobile, giving definite figures about their population is a hazardous undertaking. This is perhaps not impossible in the case of a bird like the great Indian bustard so large and conspicuous in open country. Yet I was surprised at the self-confidence of the author when he asserts that in the Sanctuaries of Maharashtra, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Madhya Pradesh, the total population including the 14 in Rannenennur is 7456, that is the figure for the whole country. For me it is a surprise that so many of these birds still remain.

Describing the familiar scene in Ranganthi during the breeding season he writes : “As the sun came up and the temperature rose these storks came down to the water’s edge to slake their thirst. Because of the gaps in their beaks, much water is split as they raise their heads to drink. The poor birds have to repeat the process a number of times before they can have their fill.” This is a good example of careful observation.

While in Ahmedabad the author noticed a pair of lapwings in an open field, and by their general behaviour surmised that they were nesting. He kept a careful record of the nest, the eggs and the hatchlings : “The chicks .... were barely a few days old when .... torrential rains .... poured down incessantly throughout the night .... At first light I went out and scanned the ground with my binoculars. Incredibly as it was three chicks

were busy feeding, with their parents keeping a watchful guard. The rain had claimed only (one) casualty". There seems to be good Disaster Management in the bird world.

He did a similar exercise with a pair of purple-rumped sunbirds in Sastri Nagar in Chennai, and saw the entire process of nest building and its final result. "Only the female was engaged in the nest building" and the male merely encouraged her by being around and possibly alerting her to any danger. "The material used in building the nest reflected the surroundings; it was coconut fibre mostly". On the 7th day the female occupied the nest. But the first egg was laid on the 9th, and the second on the 11th. After 16 days two tiny pink blobs were found in the nest. I am surprised that in the Nidification of the Birds of the British Empire, Stuart Baker gives no indication of the incubation period. Salim Ali and Hugh Whistler do not even refer to incubation. Does it mean that this is an area for further research?

The Shillong Phenomenon is an exciting chapter. This strange occurrence of a multitude of bird species crashing into petromax lamps usually on misty October nights remains a mystery. While posted in Shillong he left "early in the morning passing through about 150 kms of primeval forest, and after crossing two rivers by ferry we reached Haflong after nightfall, in time to see the spectacle. "During the night they had "listed 16 species, ranging from the tiny paradise flycatcher to the wedge-tailed green pigeon. And at our spot 60 birds had been picked up."

One curious fact mentioned by Baskaran is that all the birds which died dashing into the lights were diurnal birds-not a single nocturnal species. The owls and the nightjars of which they were plenty around were never involved in this Hara Kiri.

The other chapters in the bird section (covering 83 pages in all) deal with Jerdon's courser and Blewitt's owl before their re-discovery in Cuddapah in Andhra and Shahada in Madhya Pradesh, to the pelicans of Kokre-bellur, the flamingos of Purbunder, and the migrant white storks in Bangalore. Altogether delightful reading, and well worth possessing.

Zafer Futehally



#### CORRESPONDENCE

**BLACK-NECKED STORKS, SARUS CRANES AND DRONGO CHICKS.** N. SHIVA KUMAR, Corporate Communications, c/o. Indian Oil, A-1, Sector-I, NOIDA 201 301

I would like to corroborate the observation made by K.S. Gopi Sundar of Wildlife Institute of India, where he suggests counting of black-necked storks to be undertaken in the dry season.

On 20th June 1999 I also took up the Sarus Survey under the guidance of B.C. Choudhury, Scientist of WII. Accompanying me was my 9 year old son. Together we examined 7 sites and traveled nearly 100 km from dawn to dusk searching for the elusive sarus. We came across only four pairs of sarus cranes and all of them were found in the vicinity of water logged cultivated fields in different parts of

Mathura District. Excepting one pair all others were found with the help of villagers who had ample knowledge of their movements.

Having stayed in Mathura from 1991 to 1996, I was also aware of the various locations of the possible sites where sarus cranes occur. But to my dismay not one was found at the designated spot. Over the years, there is certainly a decrease in the number of cranes sighted in and around the Mathura district mainly due to draining of water bodies and active construction work. In fact, so desperate is the situation of small and big wetlands vanishing that in the year 1995, I found one pair of sarus seeking solace right inside the 'thundering' Mathura Oil refinery. They were resting in an isolated patch of grassland close to the ecological park, which lures a variety of water birds.

During the sarus survey we ventured into a hamlet looking for 'big' birds as indicated by villagers near Chatta village. We only saw egrets 'punching' into the waters. Further ahead at an isolated spot in a deep depression approximately 20 x 30 feet across we noticed two adult and three sub-adult black-necked storks, a pair of white-necked storks, a pair of spoonbills and three egrets engrossed in feeding.

Unmindful of our presence they seemed to be in a great hurry to finish their fishy find under the hot summer sun. The time was 3 p.m.

Most wetlands in and around Mathura district dry out in the blazing heat. Even the mighty Yamuna river turns into a trickle attracting various birds. Only a few secluded deep-water bodies attract cranes and this is obviously the right time to take up a count not only of the black-necked stork but also the white-necked stork, the spoonbill, ibis, painted storks etc. The count of less 'exotic' birds like egrets should also be taken up to keep a trend of increase or decrease in their number. Summer like winter can be a good season to go bird watching, counting and photographing for avid ornithologists.

Mr. B.C. Choudhury of WII should in future years include other cranes and storks for his survey and also ensure that the 'unprotected' water bodies be given protection by the environment friendly villagers, who will be the real guardians of the sarus cranes in the coming years. Propaganda through regional and local newspapers is vital to alert the rustic folk about the importance of safeguarding our avian heritage.



**SIGHTINGS OF THE EUROPEAN ROLLER (*CORACIAS GARRULUS*) AND CROWBILLED DRONGO (*DICRURUS ANNECTANS*) IN CORBETT TIGER RESERVE, UTTAR PRADESH, INDIA.** MAAN BARUA, Barua Bhavan, 107, M.C. Road, Uzan Bazaar, Guwahati 781 001, Assam, India.

**European Roller** *Coracias garrulus*

On 17 May 1998, Aniruddha Mukherjee and I were watching birds around Dhikhala in Corbett Tiger Reserve, Uttar Pradesh. At about 06.35 hrs we saw a roller perched on a Haldu *Adina cordifolia* tree on the banks of the Ramganga river. On closer observation we noted the following characteristics: Crown, nape, ear-coverts, breast and rest of underparts aquamarine blue; mantle and tertials cinnamon-brown; blue greater coverts becoming darker towards median

and lesser coverts; black primaries and secondaries; blue tail with dark corners.

The bird was identified as an adult European roller *Coracias garrulus*, being easily distinguished from the Indian roller *C. benghalensis* by its black flight feathers (v. banded dark and light) and uniformly light blue breast and underparts (v. blue restricted to abdomen and vent). For comparison, there were both Indian rollers and dollarbirds *Eurystomus orientalis* on a nearby tree.

The European roller is a breeding summer visitor to West Pakistan, Jammu & Kashmir. It migrates to Africa and presumably Africa in autumn, commonly passing through Sind, Rajasthan and Northern Gujarat (Ali and Ripley 1983, Grimmett et al., 1998). Although Corbett Tiger Reserve is not within its normal migration route, there have been instances of birds straggling to parts of Uttar Pradesh, Madhya Pradesh (Seoni District), south through Maharashtra (Dhule, Khanda, Bombay) to Karnataka (Karwar).

#### Crowbilled Drongo (*Dicrurus annectans*)

On 19 May 1996, I accompanied Rishad Naoroji to monitor the nest of a lesser fish eagle *Icthyophaga humilis* situated on the Dhikala-Dhangarhi road. At about 14.00 hrs, I came across a mixed-species flock in the forest patch where the nest was located. It consisted of birds such as fulvous-breasted woodpecker *Dendrocopos macei*, lesser yellow-nape *Picus chlorolophus*, paradise *Terpsiphone paradisi*, bluethroated *Cyornis rubeculoides* and tickell's blue flycatchers *C. tickelliae*, haircrested drongo *Dicrurus hottentotus*, etc. While watching the flock, my attention was drawn towards a drongo that looked markedly different from the haircrested drongos that were foraging nearby. I noted its main characters which can be summarised as follows:

Size and general colouration similar to that of the black drongo *Dicrurus macrocercus*; structurally differing from *D. macrocercus* by broader and less deeply forked tail (although not as broad as in *D. hottentotus*); rather stout and thick bill (unlike *D. macrocercus*) and somewhat more stocky in appearance than other drongos.

I recognised the bird as a crowbilled drongo *Dicrurus annectans* as the "blunt" tail and a stouter, thicker bill than other drongos are characteristic of this species. The only other species it can be confused with is the black, but the latter has a deeply forked tail and a thinner bill. Moreover, the black drongo tends to prefer open areas and light woodland whereas the crowbilled is seldom met away from forest where it tends to forage in the middle storey rather than from exposed treetops. I am familiar with both crowbilled and black drongos after having seen them several times in northeastern India.

Although the seasonal movements of the crowbilled drongo are imperfectly known, it is a summer visitor (or resident, subject to seasonal movements) to the Himalayan foothills from North Uttar Pradesh (Kumaon) east to Arunachal Pradesh, and north-east India (Grimmett et al., 1998, Ali and Ripley 1983).

#### Discussion

These are the first records of the European roller and crowbilled drongo from Corbett Tiger Reserve (Grewal and

Sahgal 1995). The former is a straggler to the area as the reserve does not lie within its usual migration route. The crowbilled drongo is presumably a summer visitor to the area and hence has been overlooked due to the paucity of observations during this season.

#### Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Rishad Naoroji and Aniruddha Mukherjee for their help and company in the field.

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[The European roller was seen by George Schaller when he visited Kihim. There is a note about it in our visitors book] Editor.



#### NO SIGHTING OF SULTAN TIT IN PERIYAR TIGER RESERVE. H.S.A. YAHYA, Centre for Wildlife & Ornithology, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh 202 002

Since Mr. Ghosh had not mentioned the scientific name in his note (NLBW 39: 1), I got confused about the bird which is regretted. What I meant in my note (NLBW 39: 3) was *Parus xanthogenys*. Thanks to Mr. S. Karthikeyan (NLBW 39: 5) for pointing out the mistake. I have never sighted any *Melanochola sultanea* in the Periyar Tiger Reserve, nor is there any such reference.



#### GREAT PIED HORNBILL IN THE EASTERN SLOPES OF NILGIRIS. A. BHOOPATHY (Advisor), Kotagiri Wildlife and Environment Association, 4/65, Sackathai, Aravuru 643 261, The Nilgiris, T.N.

The forest of the eastern slopes of the Nilgiris is the habitat of the great pied hornbill (*Buceros bicornis*). Unfortunately it is being fragmented by tribal settlement and coffee plantations. Even in coffee estates the original fig and other fruit trees (so necessary for hornbills) are being replaced by the silver oak.

Date of Spotting	Place of Spotting	Taluk	No. of Birds
12-02-90	Aralyoor	Kotagiri	2
02-02-91	Arakkodu	-do-	1
04-03-92	Cliffy Slope	-do-	1
06-04-93	Konavakorai Slope	-do-	1
18-12-93	Kolikorai	-do-	2
21-03-94	Kunjpandal	-do-	1
02-02-95	Medanadu	-do-	2
07-04-95	Marvala	-do-	1
03-04-96	Vogapandal	-do-	2
09-03-96	Lowerdroog	Coonoor	2
10-09-97	Kalloor	Kotagiri	2
05-04-98	Chommanarai Village	-do-	1
17-03-99	Kalloor	-do-	2

We have been watching the great pied hornbill from 1990-99 in the forest and coffee plantations of eastern slopes in Nilgiris: Aralyoor, Arakkodu, Cliffy slope, Konavakorai slopes,

Kolikorai, Kunjapani, Medanadu, Marvala and Vagaiyeni. We have recorded its visits in summer, and between middle of February to end May. But in the year 1997 we watched them from December 18th to January 10th 1998 in the Kolikorai area. In the Kallocr area we spotted them on 10th September 1999. We have gathered the following details and also a photograph while it was perching on a dry branch in a coffee plantation in Kolikorai village.



#### ARRIVAL OF SPOTBILLED PELICANS AT UPPALAPADU.

K. MRUTYUMJAYA RAO AND K. RAMANA KUMAR,  
Secretary, VANA VIKASA, D.No. 10-3-112, Parja Street, M.G.  
Road, Bapatla 522 101, Andhra Pradesh.

The Uppalapedu village is about 7 kma from Guntur on Guntur - Tenali Road via Nandivelugu in Andhra Pradesh of Guntur district. The village water tank is very good refuge for various species of birds. This tank is a unique refugee for birds throughout the year. This type of habitats or water bird sanctuaries are few in India. Several water bird sanctuaries shelter the birds for 5 to 7 months only. Not only sheltering thousands of birds, this tank is also the breeding site for various species of birds.

35 species of resident and migratory birds visit this tank.

From 1989-90 onwards the tank is being observed for bird life. The resident birds such as cattle egrets, little egrets, little cormorants, open billed storks, night herons were roosting on "prosopis". Other local birds like jacanas, moorhens, spot billed ducks etc., were also residing in the tank. The tank is a very good refugee for cattle egrets. The roosting population of cattle egret varies according to seasons from 1000 to 10,000. Few cattle egrets are breeding at this site. 200 to 2000 little cormorants roost in the tank. There is no nesting activity of little cormorants in the tank. The tank is also a very good refugee for about roosting 1500 night herons. Night herons are also breeding in the tank. Chestnut and yellow bitterns were also seen in Typha around shallow water body. During 1992-94 white ibis, painted storks, glossy ibis arrived at the tank. White ibis increased their numbers from 200 to 1000. They are breeding in the tank. The number of painted storks increased from 5 to 350 with 90 active nests. Glossy ibis are occasional visitors to the tank. Spoon bills are also occasional visitors to the tank but the number is 2 to 4 only. The number of open billed storks at the beginning were 200 to 600 later reached to 3500. There were 7000 open bills during November 1998 with 300 nests and 5000 numbers in November, 1999 with 500 nests. A good number of rosy pastorals visit this tank. Their number ranges from 300 to 10,000.

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During January 1999 one spot-billed pelican visited the tank and stayed for 3 weeks. During 3rd week of January 2000, 26 pelicans arrived and they are mating and have started their nesting activities.

The villagers are bitterly complaining that the water is getting polluted due to excreta of birds. They are claiming that itching, rashes and other skin diseases are spreading due to pollution of water by bird droppings. The children, women and elderly people are suffering severely and want to get rid of birds from the tank.

It was stated by Sri Peddi Appaji, Sarpanch of Uppalapadu that the Panchayat wants to dry out the entire remaining portion of vegetation in the tank and wants to construct bund across it or to clear entire vegetation during March/April of this year, so that the birds will leave the tank permanently.

Two years ago D.F.O. Sri K.V.S. Subramanyam opened an eco club at Uppalapadu high school. On 3.2.2000 Sri B. Ananda Mohan, DFO, Guntur visited the tank along with us and made some suggestions to the high school head master and others at Uppalapadu.

Sri Peddi Appaji, Sarpanch of Uppalapadu arranged appointment with M.L.A., on 17.2.2000. We along with Sri Appaji, Sri M. Seetharamaiah of Uppalapadu, Sri B. Sudhakar, Sri E.L. Narayana and Sri K. Srinivasa Kumar of Bapatla met M.L.A., Sri Makineni Peda Ratnaiah and represented the problem and have requested him to take necessary action for protecting the tank. Even though he was very busy at that time, he was kind enough to hear all the history of this bird habitat and the problems and has given an assurance to protect the habitat and also to solve the water problem. He has assured further development of the habitat, planting of bird attracting trees etc.

We request you to help us in our efforts by writing to the Chief Minister of A.P., Principal Chief Conservator and Chief Wildlife Warden of Andhra Pradesh, requesting them to protect this unique herony.



#### ERRATA

The note on duetting by drongo cuckoos in NLBW 39 (5) : 72 was authored jointly by K.S. Gopi Sundar and Rajah Jaypal. Omission of the latter's name is regretted.

As for the calls of drongo cuckoo, Wright (Dehra Dun, 1957) has confirmed the observation recorded more than two decades earlier by Osmaiston in Birds of Dehra Dun and Adjacent Hills (1935).

In the article written by H. Daniel Wesley "Nest Sites of Sunbird" in NLBW 39(5) : 79, read the name of the monkey occurring in Thanjavur as Bonnet Monkey.

Editor

Cover : Male Roseringed Parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*) This alluring grass green coloured parakeet with cherry red hooked beak, prefers to live in flocks. The flocks collect to roost in large avenue trees and groves, travelling long distances from their feeding grounds in swift direct flight, uttering loud shrill calls. Presently their numbers have declined alarmingly due to loss of avenue trees and nesting sites, and the ongoing pet trade.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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### Restoring Wetlands

One of our functions as birdwatchers is to play a constructive role in the restoration of degraded land. There have been innumerable seminars on this subject, and yet there has been no dramatic change in the landscape for the better in the last decade. Another National Symposium on Conservation, Management & Sustainable Development of Freshwater Resources of India, is to take place at T.N.B. College at Bhagalpur University, Bihar - 812007, between 24th-26th March. Some of you may like to send in your suggestions to their Organising Secretary, Dr. Sunil K. Choudhary.

During a recent discussion with some friends, including S. Rangaswami and Aasheesh Pittle, about the possibility of motivating the administration to save our wetlands, it was decided to write to the former Minister of Environment, Shri Suresh Prabhu (now in charge of Fertilizers & Chemicals). The main point of the letter was that only those wetlands can be saved which are as yet free from human settlements around them, and where there is still a reasonable amount of open land to undertake conservation measures. Several of our readers, I presume, are acquainted with such wetlands, and a detailed note about them (preferably with a photo) might result in action taken to save and restore them. Birdwatchers because of their deep interest in this subject are well placed to participate in this project.

If Governments, Central or State, and the newly empowered Panchayats do not respond, we can still get into action, and some guidelines about what to do are available in the Journal of Ecological Society, Vol.12, 1999 (Editor, Prakash Gole). Here is the case of an abandoned Stone Quarry "A 15 acre pit, 3 to 6 m. deep, full of weeds (*Typha angustata*) growing densely on stagnant water and mud, mosquito menace serious, municipal and industrial wastes flowing into the pit freely."

Properties of land : Loose, slushy mud, highly eutrophic, water weeds present. Rock and thin soil exposed in some places of uneven bed.

Action : De-weeding and de-silting of extensive nature. Weeds embedded for composting. Water aeration and oxygenation with a series of fountains. Sewage diverted to town sewerage system. Alternative refuse dumping organized. Cooperation of inhabitants in the neighbouring huts ensured through appeals by the local corporator and municipal staff. Landscaping done for separating lake (about 6 acres) from exposed ground. Plantation of ornamental plants and forest trees on ground. Nalla construction (stone and earth, not concrete) and its plantation with aquatic and amphibious plants to function as root zone filters. Nalla designed for carrying waste water from huts.

End use decided : Amenity for society - forest, garden, jogging track, gymnasium, playground, study area, amphitheatre - all open-air amenities on ground. Lake for game fishing, boating.

Upper lips of the quarry for observation posts and sight-seeing sites, recreation, refreshment kiosks, etc.

**Present status :** First of the three phases of work completed. Two nallas, three fountains and cleared lake functioning for the chosen purposes. Tree plantation and ornamental herbs for garden on cleared ground achieved, playground functional."

So this is the sort of action which we need to take countrywide. Our slogan could be 'Degradation, an opportunity for Restoration'. Obviously birdwatchers by themselves cannot undertake projects of this kind. But if they can tie up with an industrial company, and give them the necessary guidelines, some I am sure would participate in this important endeavour. A rather dramatic example of Restoration is provided by the project on the Danube Delta. (*described in this issue*).

#### **Ornithological Fraud. The case of the forest owllet (*Athene blewitti*)**

What pleasure do people (even reputed scientists) get from presenting false data? Do they not realise that if they are found out their name would be mud, and more seriously even other printed material in literature would become suspect for all time. It is now revealed that Col. R. Meinertzhagen, an admired ornithologist, and a close friend of Salim Ali (with whom he did a collecting trip in Afghanistan) "purloined specimens. He often relabelled birds with false data about where they had

been collected, a practice that can confound studies of geographic variation in a species, and otherwise undermine the museum collections that scholars mine for basic data".

The forest owllet, one of the rarest of birds found only along the banks of the Narmada, was first reported by James Davidson in 1880. After that no birds were seen, until in 1914, Col. Meinertzhagen produced a few specimens allegedly from a different site than the one from where Davidson had done his collection. Pamela Rasmussen, a researcher of the Smithsonian Institute Washington (an ornithological Sherlock Holmes) suspected that the specimens supplied by Meinertzhagen, were stolen by him from the British Museum of Natural History, re-furbished, and presented with a new label as fresh material. Luckily for him, Meinertzhagen died in 1967, and does not have to face this charge of larceny.

But the cheering side of this story is that on 25 Nov. 1997 in the foothills of the Satpura Range Rasmussen and her two companions "positively identified a living breathing forest owllet calmly perched on a bare tree". Since then more birds have been seen by the BNHS team, and like Jerdon's courser this was the other bird rediscovered in the last millennium. Apparently a BNHS team is again in the field looking out for these birds.



## Survey of Heronry at Atul Chemical Industrial Complex

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**Introduction :** The habit of nesting colonially is a feature among some waterbirds. Heronries, where birds return each year to breed regularly become traditional nesting sites.

In India, 26 species of waterbirds are known to nest colonially. At least 360 sites exist of colonial waterbirds nesting all over India. (This heronry is not counted in the existing sites). Of the 26 species considered, the little cormorant, night heron, pond heron, cattle egret and little egret are the most common nesting species in the heronries of India.

**Study Area :** Atul Limited is situated about 80 km. south of Surat and 200 km. north of Mumbai. It is one of the largest industrial complex, specifically for chemicals, dyes and pesticides. The complex is surrounded with thousands of trees of the Atul Township, a reasonably big mountain (Parmera Dungar) on the north side and an ever flowing Par river on the south side. A big dam over it is hardly hundred meters away. The township has a large number of tall copper pods, rain trees, gul mohur, eucalyptus and beef wood trees, while Parmera Dungar is covered with teak plantation of the Forest Department.

The site of the heronry is well enclosed and protected from the general public. The complex is spread roughly over 6 to 7

sq.km. It is just a chemical-steel-concrete jungle, and there is a lack of water and open ground. There are just a few densely foliated trees. Following recent showers the trees were blooming and putting out multi-coloured, fresh green leaves.

The main objectives of the study was to count the number of birds, nests and trees, and discover their preference for particular species of trees.

The breeding of waterfowl coincides with the monsoon in Central and Peninsular India. The monsoon season of South Gujarat extends from mid-June to mid-September. It appears that selection of a specific nesting habitat by these birds is not merely for 'a safe nesting site' but also on the availability of suitable feeding conditions at a chosen site. Abundance of food, availability of nesting sites, easily accessible nest material, optimum atmospheric conditions like temperature, humidity, light during the day and night time and viable breeding population, are all factors determining the age and size of the heronry and composition of its species. With the decline of natural habitats, enclosed and protected areas like the Atul Industrial complex provides a good substitute for the most adaptable waterfowl species.

**Methods :** The study was carried out in the morning and evening hours of first three consecutive Sundays of August, i.e., 1st, 8th and 15th 1999. August was the most suitable for the survey. We proceeded along the interplant link-roads and visited each and every tree within the campus to survey and count the total number of birds, species and nests on each tree. There are 50-55 large trees in the campus, but the heronry involves only 25-26 trees. Serial numbers were given to these nesting trees. As the study was focussed on the heronry, only colonial birds are described species-wise.

**Observations :** During the present survey 9 species were recorded. The total number of birds in the heronry was 1034 to 1122, in 22 to 23 trees. About 346 to 384 nests were recorded. The most abundant species in the heronry is the openbill stork, followed by night heron and little egret. Openbill stork preferred banyan tree for nesting. Almost 85% of openbill storks were seen on the banyan tree. In the complex woodland birds were also counted, and the total number of species in the complex is 30.

**Night heron :** We observed at least 187-197 night herons in the colony, though the night herons are very sensitive to disturbance in and around the nesting colony. Almost all are in adult plumage. We have seen hardly 3 to 4 immature (by second year) or ? juvenile night herons. Almost all birds are in pairs and busy making their nests. One partner was collecting the material for the nest and the other busy in construction. Apx. 80 to 90 nests were counted. The bird utters a distinctive deep 'wauck' in flight.

Almost all nests were half built. They have preferred the dense canopy of pipalo trees as a residence.

**Little egret :** About 184 to 205 little egrets were recorded in the campus, within the three hours span. Possibly the population of little egrets is much greater as they are diurnally active and so remain away from the roosting site. Almost half the birds were in fully grown adult in plumage, and half of them were in juvenile plumage.

**Cattle egret :** About 75 to 90 cattle egrets were counted. From the plumage we can say that their breeding has been just completed. These birds are widely and abundantly distributed throughout India, but recently it has been noted that numbers have sharply declined. Learning to fly and walk is seen even in a few days old cattle egret.

**Little cormorant :** It is much easier to see, identify and count little cormorant in our study, just because of its all dark black colour. About 93 to 97 little cormorants were counted while juveniles were still in the nest. They have not stepped out from their nests, suggesting that they are newly born. Still few birds were seen with nest materials in their bill, suggest construction of nests in process. This confirms the wide span of breeding period, even at same site of heronry.

**Reef heron :** We saw 6 to 8 reef herons. Out of these, 2 were 4 to 6 days in age. Rest were fully grown.

**Pond heron :** We saw few pond herons, outside the campus near scooter shed, over the palm and kadamb trees in the garden.

**White ibis :** Only two adult white ibis were seen, soaring over the campus area, seems to be in the pre-breeding phase.

#### Interesting findings :

1. Though nesting as well as breeding activity of the openbill stork had already been completed, few adults were seen flying with twigs (green leafy !!) in their bills. Surprisingly they were keeping these twigs in the same nest, in which chicks were present. Yes, they were renovating their nest to strengthen it. Possibly their nests became shallow and porous because of their diurnal activities. Dropping down of food material and even nestlings, is a problem, because of the porosity of the nests. That's why they are rebuilding their nest, especially, its floor portion. We don't know whether all birds reconstruct their nests while feeding the chicks.
2. A few workers of the factory were aware of the birds and the heronry. They informed us that the birds were found nesting since the last 6 to 7 years. They have used this site for roosting only for the first 2 to 3 years and then they have chosen this as a site for nesting. They also told us that the birds leave their nests in two stages, one in the last week of September, and the other final exit is the month of Diwali, October end to mid-November.
3. Birds of this heronry travel hardly 8 to 10 km. around the site for foraging, mainly in the backwaters of the river dam, estuary of the Par river and small tanks of villages around the Atul.
4. Juveniles of the openbill stork like to fly and sit on the roof of the factory sheds, as a first few flights of their lives. Chicks of the openbill stork were quite silent, but they became restless and creating noisy cacophony on approaching their tree for survey.
5. Juveniles of the cattle and little egrets were foraging on the ground in the shades of trees, probably dry shrunk fish dropped from their nests in early days as their food. They were hardly 4 to 6 feet away from us, ignoring factory workers' and our presence.
6. Dead bodies of chick of openbill stork (one), night heron (one), cattle egrets (three) and little egrets (two) were found on the ground under the nesting trees, possibly it is known mortality rate of their neonatal age group.
7. One live chick of openbill stork and one live chick of little egret were spotted on the roadside in the shade of the banyan tree, probably injured, because they were hardly few days old, too immature to fly, or even to walk on the ground. We tried to place them in the safe and dark place to keep them away from the sight of the crows.
8. We also visited same site in the evening hours. In the evening the number of birds of heronry swell to more than

2500, as they are joined by birds which come to roost only.

9. 75 to 80 grey headed myna (possibly ssp. *Sturnus malabaricus blythii*) were recorded along with 1000+ common myna, 100+ bank myna, 45 to 50 brahminy myna and one small flock of rosy pastor, just outside the west wall of the Atul Limited (East) in the campus of Cyanamid and Lederly on our second and third visit. *Sturnus malabaricus blythii* is a new record for South Gujarat and possibly northernmost extent.

**Conclusion :** It is known that these birds usually nest in enormous mixed colonies only. Densely foliated trees are preferred for nesting. This campus also possesses a few eucalyptus, palm trees, small mast trees and mango trees, but all these have no nests.

What is the reason for such a big heronry in an industrial complex ? We can predict a few probable reasons:

Abundant food material available nearby. As the complex is located near one of the largest dams of the district over Par river, a good quantity of water with a large number of fish, amphibians and reptiles remain in the dam throughout the year. They can get food for themselves and their young with minimal effort. Even the seashore is hardly 3 to 4 kilometers away from the site, so that they can also have a feast of salt-water fish.

Nesting trees in the factory campus are densely foliated and healthy, giving them a feeling of safety from birds of prey or birds like the crow. The well-formed crowns of these trees give them adequate nesting space.



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**S**ummer is a pleasant time for bird watching. The lush green campus of the Jawaharlal Nehru University at New Delhi, considered one of the important thorn scrubland in Delhi, provides a habitat for a distinct group of avifauna (Dahiya and Krivov, 1999). Both for an experienced ornithologist as well as for an amateur birdwatcher it is full of ornithological delights. One does not have to venture too deep into the woods to see birds, a short walk around the campus provides sufficient opportunity for birdwatching. During the summer months the courtyard of our hostel plays host to numerous birds. Its unkept lawns with a couple of peepal and neem trees provide good nesting and feeding ground for birds. Some of the birds that can be seen commonly during the summer include bulbuls, babblers, bee-eaters, cuckoos, crows, drongo (black & bronze), koel, lapwings (red wattled & yellow wattled), myna, robin (magpie & Indian), sparrows, hoopoe, sunbirds, tree-pie and kingfishers. A couple of large green barbets and golden oriole can also be seen during the summer months;

Abundant availability of nest material.

The Factory complex is a safe place as it has only male workers, free from women and children (commonest enemies of the nests)!

There is minimal pollution in the complex, there is very little noise too, in the complex.

These are the few probable reasons, we noticed in the industrial complex for such a beautiful and successful heronry which proves that the most effective means of conservation and protection appears to be private ownership.

**Acknowledgements :** We gratefully acknowledge the facilities and permission given to work in the notified area by the Atul Limited authorities. Despite tight security in and around the factory plants, ornithologists were encouraged by the officials of the Atul Limited, East. We are also obliged to the security personnel of the Atul Limited for their full positive voluntary cooperation throughout the survey.

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## Summer Visitors

Each year, atleast for the past three years, lone pair of golden orioles (*Oriolus oriolus*) have regularly been visiting the courtyard. Though, the golden oriole is classified as a resident in Delhi, this particular pair visits us only during the mid summer months. This time coincides with their breeding season. Since they are the lone pair of orioles to be seen in our courtyard I presume that the same pair visits us each year. Migratory birds are known to return to the same breeding grounds year after year. Whether resident birds too exhibit such behaviour, I am not sure. The golden oriole is said to be a shy bird, which confines itself to thick foliage. However, this particular pair can easily be spotted moving from one tree to another and is quite conspicuous. Occasionally one can get to see a few large green barbets (*Theropercyx zeylanicus*). This bird though not as beautiful as the oriole, is very vocal so its presence is noticed for a short duration during the mid summer months.

Amongst the noisiest visitors to our courtyard are the jungle babblers (*Turdoides somervillei*). Always seen in groups of sixes or seven. The babblers along with the hoopoe (*Upupa epops*), and house sparrows (*Passer domesticus*) constitute a group of perpetually grounded birds in our courtyard. They can be constantly seen probing the ground looking for food. The babblers seem to be in constant disagreement with one another, and are always in an animated debate with one another, much like we social scientists. The babblers together with the house sparrows are capable of raising a cacophony and as if this was not enough the Indian nightjar (*Caprimulgus asiaticus*), another frequent visitor to our courtyard during the summer months, can be positively unnerving. Its call-notes on reaching a crescendo abruptly stop and then start all over again. The frayed nerved scholars residing near the courtyard, refer to these birds as "nuisance birds", as they come in the way of their academic pursuits. Then there is this solitary visitor, a white breasted kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*). Quite conspicuous with its bright colour, heavy beak and an apron type breast patch. However, behind these seductively benign exteriors, is a brutal hunter. This becomes clear when one sees it catch its prey, constituting of lizards, frogs and large insects. It batters its prey to death before consuming it. Amongst the regular visitors to our courtyard are the three bulbuls, the red vented (*Pycnonotus cafer*), the white cheeked (*P. leucogenys*), and the red whiskered (*P. jocosus*). Though the red vented bulbul can be seen throughout the year, we can see the white cheeked and red whiskered bulbul mainly during the summer months. For a long time red whiskered bulbuls in large numbers used to come and perch on top of a small babool tree next to my room. However, sometime back the tree was cut down robbing me of the opportunity to observe these birds.

One of the commonest, but the bravest bird in and around the courtyard is the common Indian myna (*Acridotheres tristis*). Unlike its cousin the Brahminy myna (*Sturnus pagodarum*), the common Indian myna is not a shy bird. It does not take to flight on a slight provocation, and ventures close to humans. In fact, my initial interest in bird watching can largely be attributed to the common Indian myna. As children we had a belief that if we spotted a single myna it meant sorrow and that something ominous was going to happen, and if we saw a pair it symbolized joy. Though these beliefs just remained ill-informed myths, they certainly made us look towards these birds with great apprehension. I had later on observed that these birds always existed in pairs. Though there could be some distance separating them, and we only needed to observe more closely to spot the other partner. This was my first ornithological observation. Much later on when I got to read Hugh Whistler's, "Popular Handbook of Indian Birds", the first bird I checked for was the common Indian myna. I distinctly remember my sense of elation when my observation made long back stood validated. Through the years my birding interests have had its ebbs and flows, but my enthusiasm for it still remains. I still do occasionally stop by the woods to admire our feathered friend.

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Editor's Note : Hugh Whistler in his book Page 203, does say about the common myna : "Seen walking about in pairs on the ground everywhere in the plains"



## Tickell's Thrush and European Roller at Mysore

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The Tickell's thrush, *Turdus unicolor* is a bird of the Himalayas. It is recorded as a common summer visitor from the NWFP in Pakistan to Sikkim and is said to winter east and southeast of its breeding range. Muganahundi lake is a medium sized irrigation tank situated 17 km south-east of Mysore city. On the 31st of October 1999 as we proceeded along the bund, a myna-sized grey bird flew from the grass beds and perched atop a nearby Acacia tree. On closer observation it revealed an overall ashy grey body with a light grey throat and a white belly. The beak of the bird was yellow-orange with a yellow ring around the eye. Based on the illustration in the Pictorial Guide<sup>3</sup> and the description in the handbook<sup>2</sup>, we could identify the bird as a male Tickell's thrush. With reference to other species confusable with this one, Ali and Ripley<sup>2</sup> state, "in the Peninsula in winter, may be mistaken

for a female blackbird, *Turdus merula*, but the latter is more olive brown and has a lightly streaked throat".

The bird is a possible straggler to Mysore and may represent the southernmost record for the species. The southernmost sighting of this bird till date was Anantagiri in northeastern Andhra Pradesh<sup>2</sup>. This bird is said to frequent edges of forest, groves and well-wooded areas in winter<sup>2</sup>. Our bird was found feeding on the ground in a grassy stretch with bushes close to a coconut grove and a mango. It may also be mentioned that the nearest deciduous forest tracts are 20 km away from the place of sighting.

Other interesting birds observed on this visit were a group of 22 house martins, *Delichon urbica*, scattered amongst a much larger group of red-rumped swallows, *Hirundo daurica* and a

juvenile Shaheen falcon, *Falco peregrinus peregrinator*. The former unmistakable with a pure white neck and belly along with shiny upper parts and a white rump is the first record from Mysore region.

The European roller, *Coracias garrulus*, also known as the Kashmir roller<sup>2</sup>, is a striking bird with a blue head, neck and belly distinguishing it from the Indian roller with brown neck and underparts. In flight the black primaries and secondaries coupled with blue coverts differentiate it from the Indian species which has blue flight feathers. It is known to breed in the areas of Pakistan and Kashmir in India and migrate to Arabia and Africa in autumn, passing through the Sindh, Rajasthan and Northern Gujarat (Kutch and Saurashtra)<sup>2</sup>. It is also recorded as a straggler in other areas, Southern most being Karwar<sup>2</sup> (14° 50' N Lat) in North Kanara district of Karnataka and Ranebennur (14° 37' N Lat) in Dharward district<sup>1</sup>.

This bird was sighted at the Lingambudhi lake, a medium sized irrigation tank in the suburbs of Mysore. From the 2nd to 7th

of October, 1999, it was sighted in the grassy area near the lake, hawking insects at times but generally sitting on electricity wires. Identification was confirmed by the pictorial guide and Handbook. This would be the southernmost Indian record for the bird.

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Editors Note : There is no mention of this species in Salim Ali BOIB 12th Edition. So is it that the race of *Turdus merula* (Mentioned in SA 12th edition) have been upgraded into a species *Turdus unicolor* by Inskip & others?



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I am now working full-time on the Sarus Crane Project of the Institute at Etawah. Etawah and the adjoining district of Mainpuri are relatively unknown on the avifauna map of the country. I suspect that the political turmoil and an aggressive reputation about the citizens of the place kept birders out of the place. I discovered a variety of habitats in the two districts, all of which are chockfull of birds, occasionally of the rarest variety. It is definitely an ideal place to work on sarus crane ecology and I hope to find out more about conserving the beautiful species. In the near future, I hope to have enough material on birds of the region to warrant a publication in the Newsletter. It would be wonderful if you could find time out of your doubtlessly busy schedule to visit the field station and do a spot of birding in the area.



#### Welcoming the Siberian Cranes

Among the 15 species of cranes extant in the world today, five are found in India. The Siberian crane is the most endangered of the five and needs no introduction. Of the 200 individuals that used to visit the country in the early '80s, only two birds survive today. These birds are part of the Central Population of Siberian Cranes and fly into Keoladeo-Ghana National Park (KNP), Bharatpur from wetlands in Russia. This much is perhaps not new to most people. This year, on November 10, the remaining two birds flew into KNP along with a flock of common cranes.

When I received an e-mail about the cranes from Mrs. Shruti Sharma (Director, KNP), a few of us at the Institute decided to go to see them. On reaching KNP, a couple of extra surprises were awaiting us. One was the ongoing preparation

of a "Crane Festival" by the park authorities to celebrate the coming of the Siberian Cranes (or "Sibes" are they are popularly called). The other was the visit of Dr. George Archibald, the co-founder-director of the International Crane Foundation (ICF) at Wisconsin, U.S.A. George, as he prefers to be called, has an uncanny way of following the Central Population of Sibes and not to be outdone this year as well, he landed at Bharatpur just behind the Sibes. A team of 25 crane enthusiasts from ICF accompanied him.

The Crane Festival, the first among its kind, was a unique mixture of education and fun. Through the festival, Mrs. Sharma hoped to educate and inform as many school children of Bharatpur as was possible, about the graceful Sibes. The first part of the festival consisted of a watching session for the children of the pair of Sibes foraging in the marshlands of the KNP. The children were told about the plant *Scirpus rotundus* which is the Sibes favourite food. In the two days I was at the park, I witnessed several truckloads, literally, of happy faced children from various schools coming in to see the Sibes. Forest guards constantly monitored the movements of the birds to ensure that every truckload got to see the birds and a couple of spotting scopes were made available for the occasion.

The second part of the festival was a puppet show. The difference being, most of the puppets were cranes, all were made within the park by the staff and a troupe of puppeteers brought in for the occasion from Jalpur. The script, complete with songs with familiar filmy tunes, was entirely written by the staff for the occasion. (And I was designated official translator of the whole show to make it comprehensible for the visitors from ICF!)

The story, which was very simple, revolved around a pair of Sibes of the Central Population. It followed their perilous journey from a wetland in central Russia through several Middle East countries, and finally into KGNP. However, the birds had begun the journey with their new chick, which was tragically poached enroute. The poachers were, however, caught and tried for their crime. Also, they were made to relate the various ways they traditionally use to capture migrating birds. The whole show, punctuated with songs, an occasional dance and colourful cranes was thoroughly enjoyed by the children who, I daresay, also took back several bits of information about cranes in general and the Sibes in particular.

The festival ended with a talk by George about the affairs of cranes in the world and what the ICF plans to do to bring back the Sibes. This year, George told the audience, the onset of winter was early at Russia and very few Sibes bred. The Central Population pair did not breed. As an attempt to bring back the population to its previous numbers, the ICF, in

collaboration with Russian scientists are planning a major project. They hope to hand-rear chicks from captive breeding pairs and hope to train them to fly behind a lightweight aircraft. And they hope to lead the chicks into KGNP. The plans have been laid and details are being dealt with. This elaborate attempt, George hopes, will bring back the Central Population.

After the festival, we went to see the pair of Sibes for the last time this year. As I watched the pair, a family of resident sarus cranes chased them and the pair took off gracefully and landed a little distance away, purring their characteristic Sibe song. The odds of this pair coming back continuously in the future are heavily against the birds. Poaching enroute, wetland conversion and pollution and a host of problems surround the birds. One thing was clear: it would be worth every bit of trouble and expense taken to bring the species back to India every year. The Crane Festival had succeeded in instilling a feeling of pride in the younger generation. The work for the older generation had just begun.



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**W**hether bird-mammal relationship is as ancient as that between insects and flowers is a debatable question. Nonetheless this relationship is one important aspect of bird association which assumes several forms. M.D. Lister (1944) while detailing the species incidence in varied habitats of Jessore, Dhubalia of Bangladesh, parts of Burma and North India has also touched upon a few bird associations he had observed.

Desiree Proud (1951), Kannan (1963-66) and Ali & Ripley (1963-74) have noticed associations between flower birds and bird flowers. Kannan found 37 species, both specialised and non specialised nectar feeder birds visit 50 species of flowering trees in the Bombay area. But the most commonly known relationship is that between domestic animals such as oxen, cows, goats, water-buffaloes, sheep etc and birds like cattle egrets, mynas, magpie robins, wagtails, crows, sparrows, black drongos and swallows.

Robert Grubb (1970-72), Bharucha (1986), Balasubramanian (1988), Ganesh (1991) and D. Ewbank (1993) have recorded association between birds and wild animals such as Gir lions, jackals, Indian rhinos, Asiatic wild buffaloes, Indian elephants, sambar, blackbuck, lion-tailed macaques. In 1996 I have watched common mynas on the Kabini lake bed following the elephants, whose movements provided "beating effect" to flush their prey. Similar association I found between cattle egrets and sambar deer in grass patches in Ranthambore. In Kanha common mynas were seen in association with sambar deer. (1997). I have observed black drongos in association with blackbuck in Velavadar. (1999).

Charles Mc Cann (1953) had noticed congregations of birds at the marriage flights of ants and termites and during the migration of the diurnal ants. (*Dorylus* sp.) Sri Kumar Chattopadhyay (1954) has recorded nest building activity by whitebacked munias near the nest of tree ants. Humayun Abdul Ali (1960) has observed the rufous woodpecker laying its eggs within the nest of red ants. (*Crematogaster*). He has also seen different species of sunbirds build their nests very close to the green leaf-nests of the large red ants. (*Oecophylla smaragdina*). Benjamin Underwood (1987-89) has watched the orange-rumped honeyguide closely following the Himalayan honey bee.

A well known type of association is between different species of birds. Salim Ali (1948) noticed a racket-tailed drongo shadowing a pair of treepies. R.S.P. Bates (1952) pursued a racket-tailed drongo following a large, yellow-naped woodpecker. S. Abraham (1972) reported a painted stork-pelican association. A.J.T. Johnson and two others (1979-80) observed a mutually beneficial association between a black drongo and white-headed babblers aerially hawking insects. Lalitha Vijayan (1980-81) found a significant connection between 25 species of birds with the Malabar woodshrike. Asad A. Rahmani, has recorded the association of black drongo, white-eyed buzzard eagle, redheaded merlin and Indian roller with the great Indian bustard. (1981-85). He has also recorded little grebes following male shovellers, pintails and wigeons. (1982). Bharucha (1987) witnessed common mynas as camp followers of lesser teal.

## Bird Associations

However the most interesting aspect of birds is their ability to take advantage of forest fires and other natural phenomenon. In the Nepal Terai, Charles Mc Cann (1932) saw drongos, swallows and shrikes feeding on the escaping partly roasted insects and small animals. W.W.A. Phillips (1953) recorded Ceylon swallows associated with grass fire in Sri Lanka. In Chitwan, Adrian Del-Nevo and Peter Ewins (1981) watched black and ashy drongos, ashy wood swallows and black-shouldered kites busy feasting at fires. In a Nagarhole forest fire I witnessed Indian rollers, black drongos and shrikes positioning themselves in advance of the forest fire and foraging insects disturbed by the flames. (1990).

Though one cannot hazard a generalization based on a limited data base, yet one is inclined to think that species belonging to Corvidae, Sturnidae and Picidae have a propensity for such associations. But then, there remain many questions to be answered.

1. Are they more adaptive to such associations than others?
2. Is such relationship casual or merely opportunistic for food acquisition, or
3. Is it governed by instinct or learnt by each individual by imitating other birds or its parents?
4. Why not other birds find such association more beneficial?



## The Whitebellied Sea Eagle in Madras

V. SANTHARAM, Rishi Valley Education Centre, Rishi Valley 517 352, Chittoor Dt (A.P.)

Mr. S.V. Nilakanta's note in the 40th Anniversary issue of the Newsletter on the white-bellied sea eagle in Adyar in the 1930's and its nest in the campus of the Theosophical Society made me look through my own diaries and notes on the species in Madras.

In 1978 (when I began birdwatching at Madras and keeping regular notes), I used to encounter the white-bellied sea eagle in the neighborhood of Adyar Estuary quite regularly. Since my house is just about a kilometer from the estuary, I have even seen the bird in overhead flight, above my house. Essentially a solitary bird, it was a magnificent sight seeing the bird soaring and hunting for its prey over the sea or the river mouth. invariably the bird would be mobbed by dozens of crows and occasionally by a kite or two. On one occasion, I noticed a bird diving and making off with a dead fish 3-5 inches long, washed on to the banks of the river.

Although I was not fortunate enough to see its nest, I was sure it was nesting in the Theosophical Society estates. The late Mr. Siddharath C. Buch, a keen birdwatcher had once told me about seeing its nest in the campus. I had seen birds in immature/juvenile plumage at the Theosophical Society on 14th June 1979 and 19th August 1980. I had also, on several instances (since 1981), noticed the sea eagle at the Guindy National Park, some 3-4 kms from the estuary and I suspected it to be nesting in the wooded area here. My suspicions were confirmed on 11th December 1983 when I found a bird carrying some nesting material. But I could never see the nest. In fact, shortly after this, the bird mysteriously disappeared from the city. I had the last 'darshan' of the bird on 21st January 1984 at the estuary after which there was no trace of the bird.

I gave up all hopes of the sea eagle turning up in the city. The seacoast and water-bodies were all getting increasingly

polluted and the coastal area was under tremendous pressure from housing colonies, industrial estates etc. though the Guindy park and Theosophical Society estates were relatively less disturbed.

After a full five years, I got a report of the bird being sighted at Adyar Estuary in early 1989. By this time, I was based at Pondicherry, though a fairly frequent visitor to the city. On 9th March 1989, I sighted an immature bird at the Guindy Park. I again saw an adult bird at Perumbakkam on 31st March (some 15-20 kms south of Adyar) and on 5th April an adult bird was back at the estuary, scattering flocks of waders feeding on the tidal mudflats as it flew majestically over them. I was thrilled to see the sea eagle back at the estuary and hoped it would stay on. A juvenile sea eagle was seen on 25th January 1990 at the Theosophical Society. I had two sightings thereafter of an adult bird at Guindy on 27th January and 18th March 1990. By then, I myself became an occasional visitor to Madras and my career took me out of the city. I have never again seen a sea eagle in the city for the last almost 10 years and haven't heard of sightings from other friends.

I know the bird is around at Pulicat lake and also elsewhere along the Coromandel coast where conditions are more favourable. I am sure that if we provide it with similar conditions, it could return to soar over the city once again. The osprey and the peregrine falcon, once persecuted and considered endangered in the UK and USA have been successfully rehabilitated thanks to strict conservation measures. Do we have the will to bring back the white-bellied sea eagle to our own coastal towns and villages where it was once so common?





## Cattle Egrets Feeding on Winged Termites, Dusky Crag Martins Roosting and Polyethylene as Nesting Material for Brown-cheeked Fulvettas

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This is an observation made during the nature orientation camp at Amboli, (Dist. Sindhudurga, State Maharashtra). On 31/5/1999, we conducted a nature trail to a sacred grove, about 2 km. away from Amboli's commercial cluster. As we came close to the grove, a flock of 8 to 10 cattle egrets *Bubulcus ibis*, were seen feeding on winged termites. The termites were emerging from the ground and the egrets were jumping and snapping them in their long pointed beaks. In the process of feeding on the termites, a few egrets entered the evergreen forest of the sacred grove, called Lingachi Rai. (Literally meaning a grove of Lord Shiva). As we approached the grove, an alert red wattled lapwing (*Vanellus indicus*) noticed us and flew off uttering the famous screaming call. This served as a signal to the egrets, who took to flight and landed a few meters away in an abandoned and inundated paddy field. A few egrets had attained their breeding plumage—their heads, necks, and shoulders orange-yellow and beaks pinkish-red. As we passed by the termite-infested area and decided to observe the egrets rejoicing their meal, the jungle mynas and the white-browed wagtail (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*) were also seen feeding on the termites. Occasionally revented bulbuls (*Pycnonotus cafer*) also joined and had their share.

Cattle egrets are known to feed on diverse creatures viz : grasshoppers, bluebottle flies, cicadas, toads, frogs, tadpoles and lizards. This observation proves that they also feed on winged termites and hence are opportunistic feeders.



### Dusky Crag Martins (*Hirundo concolor*) using their nest as a Roosting Place

On 13th December, 1993 while birdwatching on the historical Sinhgurh Fort , about 25 km. south-west of Pune, we came across more than 5 abandoned nests of the dusky crag martins on a vertical rock facing north. It was 11.15 p.m. while we were trying to locate roosting birds with the help of a powerful torch. We were lucky enough to spot a female blue rock thrush (*Monticola solitarius*) perched on a ledge, about 8 meters from the ground. Suddenly I saw a nest of the dusky crag martin at a height of about 5 meters from the ground. Surprisingly the nest was not empty. It was, but 'overflowing' with adult dusky crag martins. All the birds roosting in the nest were facing the rock face, with their tails projecting outwards. We counted 5 birds huddled together which collectively formed a strange figure. It was obvious that the birds were roosting in a small flock of 5 in order to protect themselves from the cold. The

funny figure formed by the birds could have easily confused nocturnal predators like owls, snakes and the monitor lizards. Green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) are often seen huddled together on a telegraph wire especially during the cold winter mornings. Rock bush quails (*Perdicula argoondah*) have been observed roosting on the ground in a close circle, all birds facing outwards. This strategy is used by the quails in order to protect themselves from predators. The collective figure formed by the quails looks like an almost round stone with a pointed apex. The added advantage in this kind of roosting figure is heat conservation.

*[Common and scientific names in this note are from Birds of the Indian Subcontinent: - Richard Grimmett Carol Inskip and Tim Inskip].*



### Brown-cheeked Fulvettas (*Alcippe poioicephala*) using Polyethylene Threads as Nesting Material

Bhimashankar (Taluka: Ambegaon and Khed; District Pune, Taluka: Murbad, District Thane) is one of the twelve Jyotirlingas in India and a well-known religious shrine. It was declared as Wildlife Sanctuary on 10th October 1985 by which an area of about 130.78 square km. has been protected for its biodiversity. It is also known for its tropical semievergreen forest and the beautiful Indian giant squirrel (*Ratufa indica elphinstonii*) (Bhimashankar) locally known as 'Shekru'. Recently a Tiger was located in the Sanctuary.

Thousands of devotees visit this place every year and litter it with all types of non-biodegradable material like Polythene bags and plastic bottles. Some parts of the sanctuary especially those around the Shiva temple are seriously threatened by plastic. Plastic carry bags blown by the wind get stuck into outstretched branches of trees and act as a deterrent to the birds like bee-eaters and drongos. They also make funny noise when filled with air and look like multicoloured balloons.

During my visit on 12th December 1999, I found a deserted nest of the brown-cheeked fulvettas (*Alcippe poioicephala*) in the fork of the Anjan (*Memecylon umbellatum*) tree. While inspecting the material used by the bird I realised that along with moss, dry leaves, rootlets and blackish stems of the fern (*Adiantum sp.*) the bird had also used threads of high density polyethylene (HDP) cement bags. The polyethylene threads were used exteriorly thereby affecting its natural camouflage. Woven through moss and dry leaves the threads were white.

coloured and made the nest fairly conspicuous. The entire stretch of the seasonal forest stream in the vicinity of the nest was loaded with plastic and other non-biodegradables. Examples of common mynas and house crows using plastic as nesting material are quite common. However, forest birds like the brown-cheeked fulvetta having to use polyethylene as nesting material indicates the present plight of our environment.

Nisarga-Vedh, Pune is a registered charitable trust which has been organising periodic plastic collection drives and conducting awareness programmes.

(The author of this note would be glad to receive comments from readers).



## 2000 - Asian Waterfowl Count Near Haveri

Dr J.C. Uttangi, 36, Mission Compound, Dharwad 580 001

The Haveri 'Parisara Vedike' Hubli, and myself from the Dharwad Bird Club, jointly conducted the 14th Asian one day mid-winter waterfowl programme by visiting a few important minor irrigation tank-habitats existing within a distance of 30 kilometers from Haveri, on Sunday the 16th of January.

As planned, the two teams first met at Naregal Irrigation Tank which is located about 12 kilometers west of Haveri town. It was 9.30 a.m. when we all met on the tank bund and realising that this huge tank would consume a lot of time before we could satisfactorily complete the job, we organised ourselves into groups. But our attention was suddenly drawn towards a lone pied kingfisher (*Ceryle rudis*) hovering stationary close to the bund high over the water. Mr. Gurunath Desai who has an exceptionally high perception by ear, heard the honking sounds produced by the returning feeding flocks of bar-headed geese (*Anser indicus*), and as he raised his hand pointing at them, hundreds of them sailed over our heads, rallied round the tank and finally settled down over the open water of the huge tank. It was a charming sight and soon the tank was filled with the din of waterbirds. When we took a count they were about 800 in number. The survey continued as planned and the compiled list of birds include Eurasian stilt (black-winged) (2), purple swamphen (40), black-tailed godwit (30), oriental ibis (30), black ibis (2), woolly-necked stork (4), painted stork (1), wood sandpiper (6), little black cormorant (8), pheasant tailed jacana (1), bronze-winged jacana (2), black coot (60), white breasted waterhen (1), garganey (150), cotton teal (80), ruddy shelduck (29), comb duck (50), spotbill duck (15), demoiselle crane (600), northern pintail (15), wigeon (20), common pochard (10), tufted duck (6), northern shoveler (3), grey heron (1), little egret (3), pond heron (4), as well as other bird species such as white breasted kingfisher (2), marsh harrier (4), bank myna (2), common myna (3), spotted dove (2), ring dove (2), black drongo (1), rufous-backed shrike (1), in the vicinity of the tank.

About 14 kilometers away from Naregal Tank, there is a smaller irrigation tank called Akkalur Tank, and it serves as a good

habitat for roosting ducks and geese during winter. Some species like the bar-headed goose and tufted duck seem quite loyal to this site. We reached this tank about 12.30 p.m. and found about 600 bar-headed geese. About 200 dabchick or little grebe were associated with the geese. We saw little black cormorant (5), lesser whistling teal or the Indian whistling duck (20), purple swamphen (5), cotton teal (18), bronze-winged jacana (3), and black coot (15). It appeared that each individual or family acted independently of the others. We decided to continue our journey towards Haveri where there is a big tank called Heggeri Tank just about 2 kilometers ahead of the town. We reached this tank around 2.30 p.m.

This Irrigation tank supposed to have been constructed by King Nala, is a place of pilgrimage surrounded by 4 villages. It is wholly rainfed and silted and no canal is connected to it. So, it is semi-permanent and its fluctuating water levels attract different types of waterfowl, and within a season the composition of the species changes in unpredictable ways. The most noticeable change as far as flamingoes are concerned, is due to drought, scanty rain or harsh weather. A large congregation of more than 200 greater flamingo were feeding in the middle of the tank. Along with them there were Northern pintails (50), painted storks (5), little egrets (3), large egret (1), black coots (100), little grebes (60), cotton teals (20). But what overwhelmed us with wonder at the time of our visit to this tank was the sudden appearance of a huge flock of migrating demoiselle cranes, about 1500 in number, that circled down and landed in the shallow waters far away from us. It was then 3.30 p.m. We drove back to our headquarters in the evening.

On behalf of the Dharwad Team I express my gratitude to Parisara Vedike for kindly hosting the 2000 Asian Waterfowl Count, and to all members of Hubli and Dharwad, and specially Mr. Vadi Raj for videographing the waterbird populations, and Mr. Gurunath Desai for his Maruti Car.





## The Whitethroated Ground Thrush in Mangalore

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Jolted to attention by an unfamiliar bird call I kept my eyes peeled during the twilight hours of the last week of December '99. A small verdant patch of undisturbed biota, that abuts my smaller residential sit-out, has provided me with more than 75% of the entire checklist of birds of this coastal city'. The calls uttered singly and infrequently lasted for about 20 minutes almost every day for more than four weeks. Scanning the undergrowth, I chanced upon the bird, which for a week or so, I mistook for the Indian pitta. What was odd however was the call, which I can best describe as a metallic 'ztrinn', most unlike the pitta's. Moreover, the bird on closer observation through binoculars, was predominantly blue, with a buff gold breast, white chin and throat. The most striking feature was the presence of two almost vertical black stripes that ran from the malar region of the head to the side of its neck. It also, had pitta like white patches on its shoulder and wings. I tried to photograph the bird, but poor light, a recalcitrant camera, and a pathetic talent for photographic skills combined in the right proportion to produce prints that would make daguerrotypes appear masterpieces. The upshot of the month long exercise resulted in the identification of the bird, which without doubt was the white-throated ground thrush, *Zoothera citrina cyanota*. I double confirmed the identity, for yesterday, the 23rd January 2000, the usually lone thrush, was accompanied with another of its ilk.

Despite being described as fairly common in the peninsula, the *Z. citrina* is to my knowledge unrecorded from this part of coastal Karnataka and probably the first from urban environs. I would however like to seize this sighting opportunity to take umbrage at the illustrations of the bird in reference volumes. Birds of the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett, Inskip & Inskip)<sup>2</sup> features, only the bird's head, the bright orange hue used to highlight the double dark oblique neck stripe, is many shades bolder than in the live thrush. Ali & Ripley<sup>3</sup> (Compact Edition of the Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan) illustrates

the same parts a rusty brown. Ali S<sup>4</sup>. (The Book of Indian Birds 12th Ed.) paints the same areas of anatomy, almost coffee brown. The nearest colour combinations of the bird are given in 11th Edition of the same book, but here too, the blue wing does not show the striking white patch, which is characteristic of the thrush. For unschooled amateurs like me, lifelike and correct illustrations are of crucial significance. My own talents in illustrating no doubt honed by my experience as a teacher of anatomy, are somewhat better than my talents for photography, and my harsh comments on avifaunal artists could be biased, but I still insist that publications of quality have an onus to give birders, more than just pretty pictures printed on quality paper. The need is imperative for scientifically correct proportioning, and the right colour combinations for each and every illustration. What intrigues me is, with the advances now made in the field of hi-tech photography, would it be impossible to completely illustrate atlases with snapshots only. The days of artists as recorders of anatomical data are numbered. Today's science mandates accuracy and exactness of the kind few artists, except those that probably are in possession of professional qualifications in both, art and ornithological sciences.

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## Romania Tries to Restore Giant Danube Delta

By Marlise Simons, New York Times Service



TULCEA, Romania - Marius Condac, a wildlife warden in the immense delta of the Danube River, remembers when a sudden frenzy rippled through this quiet, waterlogged world, one where change is normally measured by the rising and falling of the seasonal floods, by the reed harvest or the nesting of pelicans.

It was the mid-1980s and Romania's Communist dictator, Nicolae Ceausescu, a man known for ambitious and destructive schemes, had decreed that large slices of the delta be transformed into grain fields. He sent 6,000 men to build dikes and pump the land dry. Water plants died and animals were driven from more than 240,000 acres (96,000 hectares) and the new grounds were flattened and planted with wheat and rice.

There was more. Uncounted pelicans and cormorants were shot because they were eating too many fish. The birds were upsetting a state plan known as "optimizing fish species."

By the time Mr. Ceausescu was himself executed by a firing squad in 1989, the delta scheme was failing.

"The soil was not suitable and there was no money for chemicals," said Mr. Condac, 39, standing on deck of a boat as it chugged along one of the river's murky branches near its mouth at the Black Sea.

In the name of economics and the environment, scientists and engineers from several countries are now trying to reverse one of the biggest and fastest land-grabs in recent history.

They have already punched gaps in half a dozen dikes and dams and let the river spill back over more than 9,000 acres. Other drained areas are set to be reflooded. The agency overseeing the project is the Danube Delta Biosphere Reserve, which was created by the Romanian government in 1991 and encompasses most of the wetlands' 2,200 square miles. Ukraine, which owns about one-sixth of the delta, is expected to join. Financing comes from the World Bank's Global Environment Facility and other foreign donors.

The boldness of the restoration project has caught the attention of engineers and ecologists elsewhere in Europe and in the United States.

"Nothing on this scale has ever been tried before," said Erika Schneider, a scientist at the German Institute for Flood Plains Ecology, an arm of the World Wide Fund for Nature, which is involved in the plans. "We know about no other delta being destroyed and restored within such a short period."

Converting wetlands into arable land and construction sites is, of course, an age-old practice and such land is rarely returned to nature. But that view is being slowly eroded by a new movement to restore wetlands and flood plains for the purpose of protecting wildlife and control flooding by giving the river more space. The thinking is that fish or flood protection may be more valuable than farmlands, as in the Danube delta, where agriculture barely succeeded.

The Ceausescu technicians damaged almost one-fourth of the delta on the Romanian side, said Marian-Traian Gomoiu, until recently the head of the Biosphere Reserve. "They completely changed the philosophy of water circulation, and they made a mess." He said that the reclaimed lands quickly became too dry, producing prairie vegetation, and that irrigation with river water was difficult because water evaporated quickly and left behind too many minerals.

At this point, the remains of the grand scheme are still visible in the extensive network of levees. Discarded rusting machinery is scattered along the banks downstream from Tulcea.

But the Danube delta remains Europe's largest wetland west of the Volga. Straddling the border of Romania and Ukraine, it is a vast patchwork of islands and swamps created by the river's final split into three main branches, each with its

channels and backwaters where water and nutrients breed a multitude of living things.

On the flyways of many migrating birds, the delta serves as breeding, resting or feeding grounds for 325 species, with large flocks wintering here. Some are rare and threatened, like the black stork, white pelican and pygmy cormorant.

In spring, shad and sturgeon make spawn runs up the river and there are fat carp, bream and pike nudging among the rushes and the water lilies. Mr. Ceausescu and senior Communist Party officials used to come here to hunt the area's wild boar and deer.

Of the 20,000 people living in this watery maze, a number were forced to move to make way for the Ceausescu plan. But many others remain in small villages and hamlets in the swamps, trapping fish and game and earning tiny sums from harvesting the reeds they sell as mats, roof covering or, especially, for cellulose. Some keep bees, taking advantage of the summer wildflowers.

"It's lush now, but it's very harsh here in winter," said Radu Mihnea, a biologist at the Marine Institute in Constanta, already noting the autumn chill. "People are cut off, sometimes they have to use icebreakers to get to a doctor. I've seen swans with their feet stuck in the ice."

For the delta's people, long removed from the outside world, the fall of communism has brought its own changes. For example, they are seeing a new species: the first Western tourists. The visitors — among them devoted birdwatchers — stay on ships because hotel accommodations remain rudimentary.

There is also the novel notion of protecting nature. Mr. Condac commands a new contingent of 92 wildlife wardens. He said he needs another 40 of them because poaching is much worse since the dismantling of communism.

"Poachers respect nothing — fish, otters, wild boar — even if it's the breeding season," he said.

A fishing ban for sturgeon is under consideration. Once plentiful, it has dwindled because its roe is prized as caviar.

Unexpected support has come from the Eastern Orthodox Church. Its spiritual leader, Ecumenical Patriarch Bartholomew, who is based in Istanbul, has made the defense of the region's damaged environment church policy.

On the Ukrainian side of the wetlands, Orthodox clerics have recently signed an agreement with nature-reserve director, Alexander Volaskevich. Mr. Volaskevich will use some of his funds to repair old monasteries and priests will exhort the faithful to respect God's creation.

Courtesy: International Herald Tribune



### CORRESPONDENCE

**SIGHTING OF GREY PELICANS (PELECANUS PHILIPPENSIS) NEAR COIMBATORE.** S. ASHOK KUMAR, IAS, (Retd), Plot No. 491, Road No. 10, Jubilee Hills, Hyderabad 500 033

22 Grey Pelicans were sighted on 17-12-1999 roosting on a tree abutting Sundaka Muthur lake near Koval Pudur and Perur and located about 10 kms from Coimbatore. The lake has a bed of 400 acres and is situated within Perur Panchayat limits. Local enquiries from fishermen revealed that the birds started coming to this area a couple of years ago. They arrive in October and depart in March. However there were no reports of breeding of these birds in this area.



**BIRDS OF CARAMBOLIM LAKE.** HEINZ LAINER, Praias de St. Antonio, Anjuna 403 509, Goa.

You had asked me to do a write-up for the NLBW on the birds of the Carambolim lake. Since the writing of The Birds of Goa (I had submitted it in March 97) much has changed at Carambolim: The Konkan Railway has laid its track smack through the lake, dividing it into two, and even built a station on this embankment. The damage to the population of waterfowls is less than I initially feared (Birds don't seem to mind trains all that much) but I am still in the process of assessing it. So I hope you won't mind if this write-up materialises only in the next millennium; let's say in July/August 2000. Promise!



**CRANES AND DOGS.** BORAD C. K. and AESHITA MUKHERJEE, National Tree Growers' Cooperative Federation Ltd., NDDB Campus, Anand 388 001

On May 21st 1998, we were engaged in roost count of the Indian Sarus crane *Grus antigone antigone* on a marsh near Machhiyel village of Kheda district, Gujarat. The shallow marsh (average water depth of 30 cm) was created due to seepage from a canal with a spread over area about 30 ha wasteland. This marsh was being utilized by the cranes for night roosting. At 19:20 hr., five dogs were crossing that marsh. When the dogs were at about 50 m from a flock of 36 cranes, the cranes became alert and gave a few alarm calls. The dogs passed calmly and reached the bank. Two dogs again entered the marsh in the direction of the crane flock. When the dogs were at a 25 m distance, the cranes started an alarm call. The alert cranes skirted and surrounded the dogs by positioning themselves in a semicircle. The dogs slowed down but the cranes moved in closer to the dogs. During their approach, some individuals were calling continuously. Suddenly, the rhythmic movement of the cranes broke when the dogs were

just 5 m distant. This led to a gap in middle of the crane's chain. Taking advantage of this gap, the dogs ran through the barrier. The dogs escaped and disappeared, the cranes calmly returned to an island. In a similar situation, once Walkinshaw (1973) described an incident of a sarus meeting a jackal in KNP. Both sarus and jackal crossed each other without paying any attention. Next morning the carcass of a sarus was found, suggesting the jackal as a probable predator. Although we haven't come across any such incident, but it could be true in Kheda too.

#### Acknowledgment

We are thankful to Dr. B. M. Parasharya for going through this manuscript.

#### Reference

Walkinshaw, L. H. (1973). Cranes of the world. New York: Winchester Press.



**VULTURES OF NAGARAHOLE NATIONAL PARK.** SARATH C.R., Kabini River Lodge, Nagarhole National Park, PO Nissana Belthur, H.D. Koti Tq, Mysore 571 114

On the 17th of January 2000, I came across a dead elephant, a tusker about 25 yrs old, along a viewline. The same afternoon when the Vet of the Forest Department came to perform post mortem, I convinced him not to cremate the elephant but to leave the carcass to the scavengers. I was particularly interested in observing if the vultures can benefit from the huge amount of feed. Fortunately, the elephant was in an open area.

On the noon of 18th January when I went back to the site, I was overjoyed to see about 100 vultures! I observed them over a period of 10 days and some vultures were still about till date!

The species of vultures I observed were (at the peak of activity): Indian long billed (*Gyps indicus*) about 40-50; Indian white backed (*Gyps bengalensis*) about 30-40; king vulture (*Sarcogyps calvus*) about 8-10.

The activity declined after about 4 days of feeding and the number of vultures dropped from about 100 to about 40.

One should commend this positive decision of the vet. Dr. Nanjappa supported by the local RFO Mr. Srinivas (Anthara Santhe Range) and the DFO of the park Mr. Krishna Gowda. Having seen so many vultures and when told about their threatened status, the DFO agreed to do the same, leave the dead bodies in the open, in future too.



**MOST SPECIES OF VULTURES OF KACHCHH IN ONE PLACE.** SHANTILAL N. VARU, Junavas, Temple Street, Madhapur Bhuj, Kutch 370 020

While on our way for the Waterfowl Census at Tappar dam Tal, Anjar on 16.01.2000 with members of the Pelican Nature Club, we saw a good concentration of vultures on the road side fields on the way of Bhimsar-Tappar. Most of the vultures occurring in Kachchh were present except the cinereous vulture. Species wise, the nos. were as under :-

King vulture (1); white rumped vulture (10); Egyptian vulture (10); long billed vulture (8); Indian griffon vulture (7).

The king vulture is very rare in Kachchh. Two common pariah kites were seen which have also become rare in Kachchh.

These scavengers were attracted by six carcasses of goats which were possibly killed by some predator, could be a striped hyena or a wolf.

When the number of vultures are dwindling at an alarming rate, we were fortunate to see most of these species in one place.

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**ABSTRACT**

**HOUSE CROW REGURGITATING FOOD FOR ITS YOUNG.** ARUNAYAN SHARMA, N.S. ROAD, In Front of T.O.P., Maldia 732 101

On 30th January, Arunayan Sharma was watching from his terrace a female crow feeding her single chick at the nest. She brought some pieces of fish but first of all ate the fish herself and then regurgitated the skin. This she did 4 times, then having thus softened the fish she gave it to the chick. Presently the male crow also came with some food for the chick. This observation indicates that crows too have the habit of making food more digestible for their young by softening it themselves. The author assumes that the first bird referred to was the female of the pair and the next was the father.

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**REVIEWS**

**REJOINDER TO LAVKUMAR KHACHER - ON BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT.** K.S. GOPI SUNDAR, Wildlife Institute of India, P.B.18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248 001

Frankly, Lavkumar Khacher's review of Grimmett et al's book, *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*, in NLBW [39(5): 77] was the first I have read which denounces it. Being personally a fan of the book, I had to look closely at the review and found that my views on the subject are diametrically opposite and am not in agreement with the harsh treatment that it has received.

Firstly, it is surprising that experienced birdwatchers who know about the increase in the number of bird species and pertinent information about them, are yet reluctant to accept an increase in the size of new books. As far as the illustrations are concerned, not discounting a few obvious errors, the book has set a new standard. While I cannot denigrate the previously available books on the avifauna of India and its surrounding regions, the plates of a few orders such as the warblers and pipits in the older books are far from useful; something that the book in question has managed admirably to improve. In the past, birdwatchers, both amateurs and professionals, have felt acutely the absence of competent literature dealing with descriptions of birds with variable plumages. Ironically, whilst *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent* has taken a large step forward in dealing with this lacuna, Mr. Khacher finds it "confusing".

About changing names, a few readers will no doubt remember the confusion that was prevalent in publications with contributions from all of South Asia - common names of the same species differed in different countries. As pointed out in an earlier editorial of the NLBW, standardization of names, both common and scientific, is a move for the better, inspite of the initial difficulty that birdwatchers will experience ("flameback" for "golden-backed woodpecker" for instance; it takes time to get used to!). Also, this change, I suspect, is by no means a permanent one. With changes in taxonomic techniques, new observations on birds and subsequent classifications, names of birds are likely to remain tentative.

For people who have not yet seen the book, a few salient features are highlighted. The initial chapters, especially the parts dealing with the history of ornithology of the region, habitats of birds and importance of birds are illuminating and leave the reader with a fairly good idea of birds in south Asia. There is a crossing of borders into Bangladesh, Bhutan, Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, for the bird does not stick to political boundaries. This refreshing change adds to the book's attractiveness. The authors have drawn extensively from both published literature and personal observations. The descriptions of birds are succinct, terse and accurate. The illustrations, for the first time drawn by several artists each excelling in taxa of personal choice, are accurate and readers will benefit from the descriptions of varied plumage of certain birds. Plate 52, for instance, has thoroughly investigated the plumage of just two species on the entire page, the Eastern marsh harrier and the pied harrier. The distribution maps, though lacking in clarity, are welcome for birders wanting a rough distribution range of the species concerned. The bibliography listed in the book is by no means exhaustive but does well to lead interested readers to other useful literature. (By the way, 11 references are drawn from the NLBW!) While the book with its great amount of information could be bewildering to the novice, it could enable most amateurs broaden their knowledge about the avifauna of this region. In short, for people who are reluctant to look beyond the bulk and price, it would be educational to pursue carefully, the *Birds of the Indian Subcontinent*.

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**BIRDS OF RISHI VALLEY AND RENEWAL OF THEIR HABITATS.** S. RANGASWAMI and S. SRIDHAR (*Rishi Valley Education Centre - KFI*). Review by Mahesh Rangarajan, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi.

At a time when environmental concerns are commonly identified with lost causes and battles fought against heavy odds, it is a delight to come across a story of hope. Rishi Valley's is a tale of ecological renewal in more ways than one. Rayalaseema, in Andhra Pradesh, where it is located, is a largely dry region, denuded of much of its tree cover and stripped of its vegetation. Two decades ago, the Rishi Valley School authorities leased 150 acres of land from the government and launched a determined effort to conserve water, renew soil cover and plant trees and shrubs indigenous to the area. The book under review is a celebration of the greening of the landscape and the presence of a wealth of bird species that now inhabit this tract of land. The return of the rare yellow-throated bulbul to the campus symbolizes the regeneration of the landscape itself. Uncultivated land in India comes with a cluster of user rights and so relations with local livestock owners were tense when grazing was curtailed in the area. Shutting out goats and cattle did allow a high rate of success with sapling survival. The long sequence of droughts in the eighties did much to win over villagers, as fresh fodder was available from these lands unlike in adjacent unprotected sites. By creating two artificial water bodies and raising trees, what was once a barren tract has been transformed into a variety of habitats for 170 species of birds.

One of the great virtues of the book is the way in which the birds of Rishi Valley are grouped together, not in terms of taxonomy, but with reference to their ecology. Flycatchers and minivets figure together as birds of the woodlands as they are among species that favour mature tree forest. In addition, the school campus has three other habitat types : scrublands, wetlands and drylands. The last are among the most neglected of landscapes and appear lifeless to the untrained eye. As many as eight species live exclusively in this area: mainly larks and pipits. There is a deeper sense in which the format of the work reflects the changing perceptions of nature watchers in our own day and age. As the fine essay on the history of bird studies in India shows, bird studies initially attracted British officials and planters, and members of the Indian middle class over a century ago. The obsession was with identifying and tagging birds. Game birds like ducks and quails evoked special interest as they were intended for the palate. Taxonomy cast a deep shadow. Salim Ali's *The Book of India Birds* (1941) bridged the chasm, for its early sections look at the ways in which birds interact with other organisms and how they play a critical economic role as insect eaters and pollinators. This work is the first book that actually links

the presence or absence of specific birds with the wider features of the landscape so closely. The campus becomes a microcosm of large parts of India, and the deeper message, the search for underlying unities in the ways in which life organizes itself is conveyed subtly as well as powerfully. The section on multiple habitat birds includes obvious candidates like the sparrow and babbler, which are extra-ordinarily flexible in their ability to live in various humanized environments. Given that birdwatching remains a widely popular activity, the book has useful tips for the uninitiated. There are brief but informative essays on bird photography and identification, food chains and behaviour. This is vital to inculcate a level of interest that goes beyond knowing the art of identifying birds. The prose gives an insight into how a bird tends to behave and what it does. The drongo is marked by a 'certain pugnacity and fearlessness .. supreme master of the air, it attacks with formidable confidence'. The tree pie, another common Indian bird has, in the authors' words, 'at least three voices (of which) one is distinctly melodious'. This is vintage natural history reminiscent of the late M. Krishnan, if more limited in its compass.

One unique feature is that it does not stop with telling the reader how to identify a particular bird. It is a pleasant reminder of the age-old interaction of people and nature in India, long predating scientific works to be told of their classical names. The hoopoe, for instance, was said by devout Muslims to have the word 'Bismillah' written on its crest. The bee-eater is known in Sanskrit as the *saranga* bird, the comparison to a bow and arrow perhaps being derived from the way in which it chases and captures its prey while on the wing. It may be quibble, but one misses names in the common languages of Southern India, at least of Telugu. Perhaps the authors may want to think of a translation of all or part of the work, which could then reach a yet wider audience. Most of the colour plates and the photographs by S. Sridhar are vivid and accurate, making this a very useful field guide.

Rishi Valley's example is clearly worthy of emulation. It is perhaps not unique, though no one else has taken the trouble to record the experience in such an accessible form. In Pondicherry, Rauf Ali and his associates record a similar process of re-colonization of bird species in tracts when the vegetation has recovered. What is significant is that such sites point to the need to think beyond conservation as protection. Perhaps it is time to look at the processes of restoration in small patches of land if necessary. Institutions such as colleges and schools, cantonments and research centres often have the land on which such initiatives can be launched. Were some of us to follow the cue, this book will have truly succeeded in doing more than being just a fine field guide for bird watchers.

(Courtesy : Resonance - January 2000)

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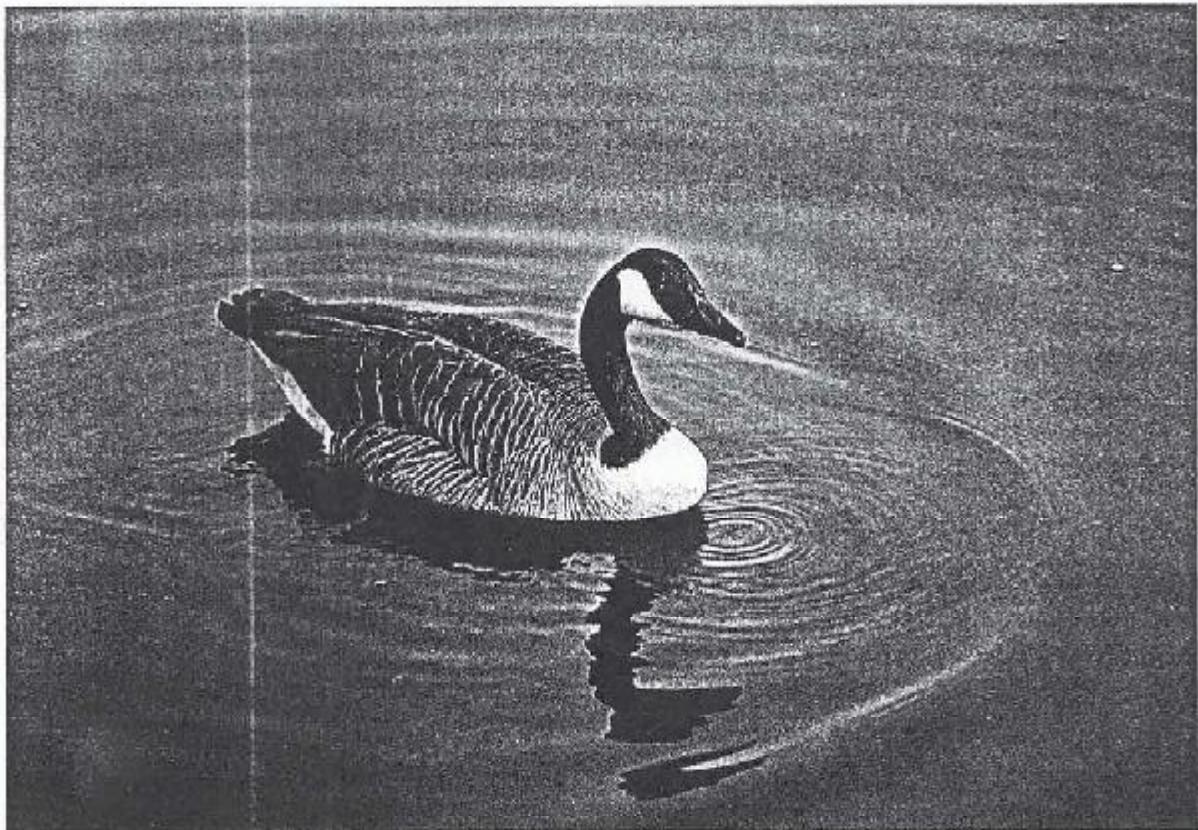
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Cover : Spotted owllet (*Athene brama*). A squat, white spotted owl with typically large round head and large staring yellow eyes. This owl is largely crepuscular and nocturnal, but not averse to hunting in broad daylight. When stared at, the spotted owllet holes up and stares back, often with its head skewed completely around, as if it were looking askance at the intruder.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

**Vol. 40 No. 3 May-June 2000**





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## Editorial

An apology to correspondents

I have been away from Bangalore from 15 March till 31st May, and on my return I find a pile of letters, articles, money orders and cheques which have remained unacknowledged. I will attempt to deal with them quickly.

May I remind subscribers again, that all payments have to be sent to the publisher, S. Sridhar, Navbharath Enterprises, No. 10, Sirur Park, 'B' Street, Seshadripuram, Bangalore 560 020.

Please do not send payments to the Editor as this leads to delay.

To ensure that the May-June issue is on time (or as near scheduled take-off as possible) I have selected a few articles which were more or less ready-made, requiring no editing. Chronology has been ignored, but all acceptable material should surface during the course of the year. However, I would like to mention again that the main objective of the Newsletter is to provide enjoyable reading about birds. Dry facts and statistics, invaluable of course for ornithology, can go to the BNHS, for their Journal, or for the new publication, MISTNET, the Newsletter of the Indian Bird Conservation Network (IBCN). It is a matter of great satisfaction that so many publications relating to birds and conservation are coming up. So each publication must network with the others and interchange material according to its suitability. Sightings of rare birds can go to PITTA, whose Editor, Aasheesh Pittie organises data carefully and is a part of the IBCN. Give me the option therefore to pass on your contribution to other newsletters, journals brochures if I feel that a particular outlet is more appropriate for them.

If I decide to use "dry" material containing useful facts I will just publish the essence, under the heading: Information supplied by ..... In case some of you do not wish your contributions to be abridged please indicate this in your forwarding letter.

**Kihim Diary :**

It has been my practice to write a Kihim Diary every year for the May-June issue reporting on my visit there during April/May. I will skip the account this time as we had the good fortune of having Prakash Gole and wife Swati with us for a week-end in March, and Goles' article appears in this issue.

I would however like to mention that while in Kihim, I read an extraordinarily fascinating book which I would like to recommend to our readers. In 1864, a Frenchman, Louis Rousselet, left Paris for India and spent 4 years wandering in our country on foot, horseback, elephant back, camel carts, palkhis, and boats. On arrival in Bombay by ship he spent the four monsoon months studying our languages. He was deeply interested in nature and in our social institutions and his account of the India of 150 years ago makes delightful reading. The book was first published in the last century but there is a reprint by BR Publications New Delhi in 1975. I give here, some examples of his writing about birds and trees.

*Page 209 at Gungahar near Ajmer : Regiments of flamingos gravely perform their exercise in the shallow waters and to see them drawn up in straight line perfectly stiff and motionless with their red wings and white breasts you may easily mistake them for soldiers at drill. A portion of them place themselves in this position to catch the fish, which the rest of their comrades drive towards them by beating the water with their feet!" (Is this a confirmed activity of the flamingos? Are they such well organised feeders?)*

Page 242, green pigeons in Ajmer : The moment they see the sportsman they remain perfectly motionless and it requires a practised eye to detect them among the green leaves of the peepul tree which they generally frequent." (Do they really freeze when a gun is pointed at them?).

I have not yet spoken of the mhowah, the tree prominently belonging to Central India, and having the same connection with these wild regions as the cocoa-tree to the banks of the Indian Ocean. Providence has endowed it with such wonderful properties that it supplies the primitive inhabitants of these plateaux with all that the most industrious nations have obtained from the whole united vegetable world.

The mhowah or mahwah (*Cassia latifolia*) is one of the finest trees of the Indian forests. Its straight trunk, of immense diameter, bears its branches arranged with regularity; and gracefully raised like the scences of candelabra: and its dark green foliage spreads itself in dome-shaped storeys, casting a thick shade all around it. Towards the end of February its leaves fall almost suddenly, leaving the tree completely bare. The natives pick up these leaves, which they use for many purposes, such as bedding, roofing and head-coverings. Within a few days of shedding their leaves, the candelabra become covered with astonishing rapidity with masses of flowers, resembling small round fruit, and arranged in clusters. These flowers are the heavenly manna of the jungle, and on their greater or lesser abundance depends the prosperity or the misery of the whole country. The petal, of a pale yellow colour, forms a thick fleshy berry, of the size of the grape, which leaves room for the stamen to pass through a small aperture; and when fully ripe, this

petal falls naturally. The Indians simply attend to removing the brushwood from around the tree, and every evening the fallen flowers form a thick bed, which is carefully collected. This shower continues several days; and each tree produces on an average a hundred and twenty-five pounds weight of flowers .....

**Calls of Indian Birds :** Snehal Patel has produced a useful and entertaining cassette of the calls of Indian birds. He has recorded the vocalisations of 58 species including those of some water birds whose calls are difficult to hear eg blackwinged stilts and avocets. The calls of the sarus and common cranes are dramatic, as expected. An attractive illustrated booklet of the birds recorded is supplied with the cassette. It is available with the Nature Club, Surat, 81 Sarjan Society, Athwalinos, Surat 395 007. Phone 227596. The price is Rs. 150 inclusive of postage. An item worth possessing.

**Fraudulence in Indian Live Bird Trade :** Abrar Ahmed, Senior Programme Officer, Traffic India with WWF has become well known for his researches into illegal bird trade. His recent brochure subtitled : An Identification Monograph for Control of Illegal Trade is a beautifully illustrated effort showing the nefarious ways in which traders try and deceive customers about the identity of the bird. Here is one example given by the author : "In most parts of India the large owls *Bubo* spp. including brown fish owl (*Ketupa zeylonensis*) are the most popular birds used for black magic and superstitions (All & Ripley 1963, Ahmed 1997) but they are not easily available and are quite expensive. Therefore traders often dye the spotted owlet (*Athene brama*) with tea leaf water and a few feathers are stuck with latex on the head of the spotted owlet giving it the appearance of a miniature horned owl". We can only wish Traffic India all success.



## Red Data Bird - Forest Spotted Owlet

FARAH ISHTIAQ

Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023

The rediscovery of the forest spotted owlet or forest owl *Athene blewitti* after 113 years provides an unexpected opportunity to save the species, which was earlier presumed to be extinct. On 25th November 1997, the forest owllet was rediscovered by three American ornithologists : Pamela Rasmussen, Ben King and David Abbott in a tropical dry-deciduous forest in the foothills of Satpura Mountains near Shahada, Maharashtra. There is some information on the distribution of this endemic species, based on only seven specimens collected in 1880's.

The rediscovery provided the impetus to search for more birds in similar habitats in central India. Thus a study was conducted for a year (June 1998 - June 1999) by the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) (with financial support of Smithsonian Institution, USA and Mr. Hans Sligg-Forycki, Switzerland) to obtain more information on the status, distribution and biology

of this enigmatic species. The study was conducted in Shahada as the base camp. It is a typical dry-deciduous forest zone dominated mainly by teak *Tectona grandis* mixed with *Lagerstroemia parvifolia*, *Lannea grandis* and *Bombax ceiba*. The forest is let out for logging once in every 10 years. The tropical dry-deciduous forest belt traverses all through the central part of India covering the states of Maharashtra, Madhya Pradesh and Orissa. These were the states from where specimens were collected in 1880's.

#### Differences between the forest and spotted owlet

For years, the forest spotted owl has been confused with the spotted owl *Athene brama*, though they are quite different. The spotted owl has the dotted crown up to the back of the head that gives an impression of eyebrows. The forest owl has a faintly spotted head, the pale auricular lacking a white rear border and it has a broad dark frontal collar which is light in colour in case of spotted owl. The breast has boldly barred sides and an unmarked white central lower portion. The lower under parts and legs are white in colour. The wings are prominently banded with white trailing edge; dark carpal patch on the underwing; and broad, strongly contrasting tail banding with a white terminal band. Additionally during this study, I found females to be slightly larger than males, with more markings on the breast and legs. The males look more whitish when viewed from the front, and tend to be more active predators.

#### Call of the forest owl

Before starting the survey, the first concern was to get good tape recordings of the vocalizations, which could then be used to detect their presence in the forest. The recorded call of the forest owl was then played back in the forest to locate them at new locations. The calls of the forest and spotted owl are found to be quite different. The call of the spotted owl is a screech, which is usually given before and after going to the roost, and sometimes while threatening a predator. The forest owl has a very sweet call that we termed as 'song' call. The spotted owl has no such comparable call to this song call. The forest owl does give screeches as threats to predators such as white-eyed buzzard eagle *Butastur teesa* and blue jay *Coracias benghalensis*, but these screeches are quite different from the spotted owl. During the study, we recorded five different calls of the forest owl, which were made during different times and situations.

The forest owl is a diurnal and crepuscular species, while the spotted owl is nocturnal in nature. The two species were recorded in the same habitats and they may be sharing the same resources but using them at different periods.

The teak plantations interspersed with grass species such as *Cymbopogon martinii*, and tree species such as *Lagerstroemia latifolia* and *Bombax ceiba* provide excellent foraging habitat to the owlets. They were found feeding on skinks, frogs, lizards, birds, snakes and grasshoppers. The feeding strategy of the owlets is quite simple. They sit and wait at one perch while scanning the ground and then pounce on the targeted prey.

#### Nesting

In October 1998, I found two pairs of forest owlets nesting in Toranmal Forest Range between 400-500 m elevation. One of the nests was located right on the Shahada-Toranmal road while the other was in the forest 600 m from road. This gave me a rough idea about their territory size. This was seen in three located pairs in Taloda as well; they were maintaining a distance of 500-600 m from each other.

The forest owl has a prolonged nesting season that starts from October and ends in March. I never found any pair engaged in nesting activities after March except those that already had chicks. During the nesting period, the male actively brought food for the female, which spent most of its time inside the nest hole. The number of eggs laid in the nest could not be determined, but after 30 days of incubation, two chicks were seen and heard calling from the nest. I observed cannibalism as well in the same pair when the male fed on both the chicks after 40 days of hatching. As the owlets were unmarked it was difficult to say whether the father fed on the two chicks or some other adult male came when the original father died or was preyed upon. The 'same pair' re-nested and had two chicks again, of which one survived successfully whilst the other was predated.

Observations were conducted for ten full nights (when the moon was full) with the aid of a night scope, to observe their nocturnal behaviour. To my surprise, the owlets did not come out after 2200 hr. The male roosted inside the nest during incubation but was not allowed by the female to stay near the nest after hatching. The diurnal roosts were close to the nest to monitor the surroundings. After January, when the trees are leafless, the owlets sit close to the trunk for shade.

In all, four nests of the forest owl were located, of which three nests were found in Shahada while one nest in Taloda (about 30 km from Shahada). Taloda is one of the main potential forest owl sites from where the maximum number of forest owl specimens were collected in the past. I have been able to locate three pairs of forest owl in Taloda in December 1998 while four pairs were located in Shahada.

#### Threats

The major threat for the forest owl is habitat degradation. In June 1998, Pamela and I went to Taloda in search of the forest owl. Around 5000 hectares of the plain forest had recently been clear-felled to serve as a rehabilitation site for people displaced by the Sardar Sarovar Dam. About 500 families now live in this area and use the forest resources. The Dombay Natural History Society has started a campaign against the felling in this area and quite a few have already written to the Prime Minister of India and the Chief Minister of Maharashtra.

The second phase of the survey was conducted in January 2000 through a small grant from Oriental Bird Club, to search for more birds in other locations. During this 25 days survey (28 January - 22 February 2000), 25 forest owlets (individuals) were located, which includes two new sites in Maharashtra and Madhya Pradesh. The forest owl had never been reported from these two sites.

The forest owllet is one of the globally threatened, endemic birds and comes under schedule I species of the Wildlife Protection Act (1972) of India. There is an immediate need to declare rediscovered sites as protected areas. I am sure that these sites are Important Bird Areas (IBA) as they meet the criterion of Globally Threatened Species. It might be suitable to lobby these sites for their inclusion in the protected area system, or it might be appropriate for them to be protected

through joint forest management or community management. From this study, I was able to collect some basic information on the ecology, feeding, nesting and roosting behaviour of the species but we need to study them in more detail and with the use of radiotelemetry. Banding of the forest owllets is necessary to differentiate male and female of the species, since they are quite similar in appearance. Without this, many questions will remain unanswered.



**W**hat if you find yourself between the deep sea and dark woods? You do not despair, if you are a bird-watcher and a nature lover. You just build a nice cottage facing the sea and enjoy the cool breeze from it or enter the woods to find out what its inmates are doing. In short, the deep sea and the dark wood do not bother you if you are one of their genre.

If you go to Kihim, this is what you quickly learn, especially when you know that the sand on the beach where you leave a mark of your foot had once intimately known the gait of Salim Ali and still enjoys the rambles of the present Editor and his wife.

The sea beckons you as you stand in the veranda of the charming cottage. The combination of rocks and sand seems to be perfect to attract marine animals and birds. One steps on the beach with great excitement and expectation. As the tide recedes leaving behind small rock pools, the world of little sea animals is uncovered. There you see the tiny barnacles and papery oysters lapping up the throb of each wave and sea shells such as Narita, Turbo and little periwinkles gently swinging with each eddy. But we greatly miss the scatter and scramble of crabs and the velvety carpets of green algae that probably are exposed only at the lowest low spring tide.

Birds seem to have bunched together as the spring advances. Groups of eastern golden plover stand motionless on rocks doing nothing, probably gazing at the distant horizons. The call of the north must be reverberating in their ears. Gull-billed terns that patrol beaches looking for tit bits are still too. But not so the terek sandpiper who trots on the sand picking up tiny food with its upturned beak. The ever lively crowd of sand plovers is busy too though some of them prefer to enjoy rest.

Further on a surprise awaits us: a pair of sanderlings, rare on coastal Maharashtra and the majestic presence of a Caspian tern with his commanding orange-red beak ready to discipline lesser creatures. He stands motionless ignoring others, thinking probably of the leap in the air that will take him far beyond the blue horizon.

With him we too stare out into the sea and the blue haze that slowly rises over it. But our eyes are drawn backward to the casuarina trees with their swaying crests as the sea breeze strikes them. We looked in vain for a perching or soaring white-

bellied sea eagle. Finding none, we looked further, beyond the casuarinas till our eyes rest on hills of Western Ghats which provide such an imposing background to our coastal strip. Brown smudges on the beach remind us of the intimate relationship these two giants of nature - the sea and the mountain - bear towards each other. The silt that is brought from the mountains by streams provides nutrients and minerals on which pulsate the life in the sea, the sea in turn generating moisture-laden clouds that breathe life in the woods and propel the streams seawards.

After the sea, a visit to mountains should follow as a matter of course. A visit to Kankeshwar high up in the hills was the programme for the next day, the editor's enthusiasm driving us up before sunrise. Trekking to Kankeshwar was both painful and joyous. The bare, eroded hill slopes in the beginning etch in your mind a spectre of a terrible future as we continue to misuse our land. These bleak thoughts gradually shrank back as solitary ficus and mango began to greet us on both sides. Soon the buzz of insects and flicker of wings were in the air. A tailor bird hopped among branches, an Indian robin called and a red-vented bulbul disappeared in bushes. As one climbed higher, troops of red-whiskered bulbuls replaced red-vents, a kestrel hovered and another falcon vanished over the corner without revealing its identity.

Gradually the wood thickened as mango and jamun, ficus and terminalia, fish-tail palms and sterculias crowded on both sides of the path. Song of the lora was followed by the tilt of a golden oriole. But what made us stand still and listen were the watery, gurgling, scintillating notes of a shama, the Tansen of the forest if we may say so!

As we neared the precincts of the temple complex and sat down for a refreshing cup of tea, the rustle and bustle in the trees above kept us busy. We saw bulbuls and coppersmiths clambering in ficus branches and feasting on its fruit; watched the amazing elephant tooth-like fruit of *Fruitada scandens* and were amused by a juvenile paradise flycatcher, completely unafraid, which kept displaying its sallying skills. The presence of the shama and the paradise flycatcher rekindled our spirits as we started descending.

From Kankeshwar one approaches the cottage through a woodland bordered on one side by remnants of mangroves

## Looking Around Kihim

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and on the other by paddy fields. In March this patch of trees was alive with excited activity of birds particularly around Erythrina trees in resplendent blossoms. Greyheaded and brahmny mynas, bulbuls and drongos, barbets and koels, moved about as if engrossed in serious business. One could not fail to be impressed by the undergrowth which showed abundant, healthy regeneration of forest species. This woodland is a tribute to the traditional wisdom of paddy farmers who use it to enrich their fields with green manure. But all good things need to be threatened by bad ones and this woodland was no exception. Illegal liquor distillers showed

evidence of cancer that was eating the woods from inside. Beyond the fields rose smoke-belching industries heralding the end of the traditional way of life in coastal Maharashtra.

On such a background these woods appeared bold and courageous, mark of a life-style that respected nature and attempted to work with and not against it. Indeed Kihim for me symbolizes these things: the beach and the woodland and the cottage and its occupants who prefer to live between the deep sea and the dark woods.



## Chance Insights into the Behaviour of Barbets, Woodpeckers and a Flycatcher

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**I**t happened on 10 April 99 at about 12:15 p.m. I was sitting under the dense canopy of a tight cluster of five non-grafted mango trees and one Bauhinia. Towering way above and over them all is one magnificent, full grown red silk cotton tree. In the month of April when the summer temperature in South Bihar is yet moderate, I love the sensation of the "Ico" (hot summer breeze) over my face and body.

I had to put aside my reading because of continuous, agitated bird alarm from inside the mango-topo. I could spot nothing from where I sat. Moving aside, I noticed considerable movement amidst the foliage. The source of alarm were five crimson-breasted barbets (CBB). They were hopping and flighting from branch to branch within the mango-topo in a fairly tight circle. Whenever a bird was momentarily stationary I could notice his beak wide open, breathing heavily possibly as much due to stress as the mid-day heat. I could not spot the agent provocateur but from the actions of the CBBs I had a good idea where the danger lay.

The breeding cycle had commenced. Crows and coucals are the more common egg robbers here. But their presence would surely have been noticed by now. I thought of the Dhamna, the rat snake, as he is also an invertebrate arboreal robber here. Just then, perhaps unable to fend anymore the winged and vocal intimidation by the CBBs, a bigger bird flitted within the foliage. My instinctive guess was of a leaf bird.

At last the provocateur emerged from the foliage and alighted on a branch of the Silk Cotton tree. The new leaves were yet to sprout and bird identification was easy. It was a green barbet (GB). All the five pursuers were still around him but being out in the open now, there was less of physical posturing by the CBBs though they kept up their vocal protest.

The birds were at least forty feet above me. There was no mistaking that the GB held in his beak a big morsel from its centre giving his beak the profile of the cross. Due to constant intimidation, the GB changed his stance often and I thought what he held in his beak was either a dragonfly or a locust-like insect. The former is generally not seen here at this time

of the year and of the latter there was little chance. (Unfortunately I was without binoculars but my bifocal bespectacled vision is pretty sharp). Whatever, the morsel was of substance as the GB had to make deliberate efforts to chew and swallow it over the next 3-5 minutes. Then, as though in victory he called kutoor-kutoor twice and flew off leaving the CBBs helpless on the Seemal and myself with a bag-full of conjectures.

Are GBs insectivorous also? Even if so, why should that have agitated the CBBs? Were the CBBs competing for the same prey? Had the GB in fact preyed on the tender, fresh hatchlings of the CBBs? I have occasionally seen a GB attempting to usurp the cavity-nest of the CBBs but in effect the GB may well have been preying? I remained vigilant in March-April this year but had no luck for confirmation.

Over to woodpeckers. Almost all of my bird sightings and observations are on my morning walks or when I walk out with our dogs; four lovable, handsome, compact Adivasi mongrels endemic to South Bihar only and one blue-blooded yellow Labrador. On 18 February 2000, around 0800 a.m. I got a fleeting glimpse of two racket-tailed drongos leaving our cottage compound. They had probably been on one of our Seemal trees, the favoured feeding perch with most birds at this time of the year. So I mounted a vigil around 04 p.m. from a corner of our compound from where the canopies of all the seven Seemals are visible. As I scanned for the racket-tailed drongo, on the crest of one Seemal I noticed three lesser golden-backed woodpeckers and then scanned on. Moments later it occurred to me that the woodpeckers ought to have been on the main trunk of the tree, their usual hunting ground. What were they doing on the top most branches amid clusters of Seemal flowers? With ten magnification binoculars and excellent visibility, there was just no doubt that these three woodpeckers had their beaks and heads deep inside the ample cups of Seemal flowers. Every now and then the woodpeckers would move over to another cluster and enthusiastically dip into the flower cup. They kept at it for 3-5 minutes when the arrival of a raven drove them away.

Were these woodpeckers feeding on the nectar of the Seemal flowers? Were they picking out ants and insects which could have been inside the cup of the corolla? For, I have noticed in flowers lying dislodged on the ground the presence of ants moving about the thick cluster of stamens inside the cup of the flower.

I made determined attempts for confirmation over the next three days. The woodpeckers did show up but they showed no interest in the Seemal flowers. However, I got a different insight in the process; the Ioras and white-eyes feeding on the nectar of the Seemal flowers.

Then there is this chance observation of a black-naped monarch flycatcher, around 0700 a.m. on 01 May 2000. My wife has a small water tank especially created for the pet white geese. There are three thickset ixora bushes to the west, a clump of trees to the north, a cluster of flowering cannae to the east and a small open space to the south of the tank. And

that is where I sat when this flycatcher arrived. He was in that state of hyperactivity and chatter as birds are in the cool of an early morning. Then for one moment he was silent and motionless perched on a potted bougainvillea at the edge of the tank. There are mosquitoes and their larvae on the surface of the water. May be that is what the monarch had discovered? For, in a trice, he made a shallow dive almost onto the middle of the tank, for a flash touched the water-surface with his breast and alighted on a tree to the north. Did he snap up a mosquito or larva in this swallow-like action? Was he simply attracted to the water so as to wet and cool his body? I have on earlier occasions, in April-May, seen the paradise flycatcher dive and skim the water surface of a similar water tank in our compound as also over a small pool in an otherwise dried bed of a seasonal stream but it was always at the hottest part of the day around 03-04 p.m. I had then surmised that the bird was taking water!



## A Bird Count at Nalsarovar : Experiences of a Participant

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Nalsarovar is the largest, natural inland wetland of Gujarat and an extremely significant biodiversity conservation site. Readers may recall articles about it in earlier issues of the Newsletter by Gaurier (1981) and Madge (1986). Since 1992 the Gujarat Forest department has been monitoring bird populations of Nalsarovar in a planned manner with the help of volunteers and amateur birdwatchers. The bird censuses, coordinated by DCF Mr. Uday Vora have been done in January every alternate year from 1992 onwards (except 1998 when counts could not be done) with the twin objectives of understanding long term population trends of migratory waterfowl and the impact of habitat management practices on them. This year the Nalsarovar bird census was organized on 5 and 6 February and I was lucky to be invited for participation. With the prospect of an exciting weekend ahead, I started making plans for going to Nal.

Counting birds is a dicey matter. A population of birds is the number of individuals (of a given species) in an area but this number seldom stays constant for any length of time. So while traveling to Nal I couldn't help thinking about this (most probably fictional) anecdote.

In the court of Akbar, the great Mughal emperor, Birbal was the brightest jewel, well known for his intelligence, wit and humor. The other courtiers were very jealous of him and often plotted to embarrass him in front of the emperor. The story goes that once all the courtiers got together and hatched a plot. They told the emperor, 'Huzoor, Birbal is said to be the wisest man in your kingdom capable of doing impossible tasks. But we would like to test whether he is really so clever.' The emperor agreed. 'If Birbal is so wise then, can he tell us how many crows live in the city?'

Birbal replied, 'Huzoor, I can tell you how many crows live in the city but I need three days to do my calculations'.

It did not seem like an easy task to count all the crows in the city and so the time was granted to Birbal.

Three days later when Birbal was asked about his progress he replied, 'Huzoor, I have counted all the crows in the city. There are exactly 5678'.

This answer took everyone by surprise. Someone asked, 'What if there are more than this?' Pat came the reply, 'They would be those which flew into the city to meet their relatives, after I finished the count'.

And what if there are less?

'Some crows left the city to meet their relatives in the neighbouring town'.

The courtiers knew that they had been outwitted. In desperation one of them said, 'This number cannot be true. You have made it up'.

Birbal replied, 'Very well then, you count them yourself and see if your estimate matches mine'.

This well known 'Akbar Birbal' Joke underscores an important point about the pitfalls of counting birds and the dynamic nature of their populations. All animal populations are influenced by emigration (going out) and immigration (coming in) in the short term and by addition of new members through birth (natality) and loss due to death (mortality) in the long term. Figures of bird populations, if censused periodically, can be most meaningful if they are compared with some pre-existing figures and if each time the counts are done in a standardized manner eliminating the effects of local migration, bird visibility etc.

On reaching Nal on the afternoon of 5th February I discovered that several participants had already arrived. Soon the crowd swelled till there were about 80, including 14 from the Forest department staff and the rest volunteer birdwatchers from different walks of life: teachers and university lecturers, employees of private companies, doctors (an ophthalmologist and a dentist included), members of environmental NGO's etc. Many of the 'Who's-who' in the Gujarat ornithologist circle were there and several had participated in the previous counts. As happens, in no time the birdwatchers took out their binoculars and mounted their telescopes and cameras on stands. This was somewhat reminiscent of a stranded sea anemone assuming its full and beautiful form when put back into the water. The air was abuzz with fluttering of feathers, sounds of birds and the cacophony of birdwatchers as they excitedly went about identifying terns, gulls, waders and ducks.

In due course we were rounded up to discuss the plan of action which, as we soon discovered, was well prepared by Mr. Vora and his colleagues. All fishing activity inside the sanctuary was suspended for the days on which the bird census was on, to minimize the effects of disturbance. While in the previous years the bird populations of Nal were sampled, this year a total count of birds in the open water area was to be attempted. For this purpose the entire wetland was divided into 21 zones and the participants were instructed to visit each zone, in two's on boats and count the birds. Each team was given a map of the sanctuary with his or her area marked out. Therefore the first exercise of the day for each team was to become familiar with their area and its boundaries. A preliminary counting exercise was also to be done.

The real counting event was on 6th February when all the teams had to simultaneously count birds in their respective zones between 8-10 a.m. So on the next day we were all up at the crack of dawn and with a liberal supply of food and water provided by the Forest department, set off to our assigned areas. Those teams whose counting areas were far away from the shore had to leave a couple of hours in advance so that they could be in position at the appropriate time. The guidelines for counting birds were standard and everything on the list within a zone was to be counted, provided that it was not merely flying over.

Those of you who have been to the Nal would know that its first impression is very disappointing. Unlike say Bharatpur, Nal lacks the aesthetic elements in its landscape and from the shore what you actually see is a vast sheet of placid water with huge numbers of waterbirds, appearing just as tiny dots on the horizon. But soon, as the place grows on you, the finer elements of its rustic beauty start becoming apparent. However, it is only on a boat ride that its full charm unfolds. Imagine, gliding smoothly on the still waters, with a slight mist on the horizon, a nip in air, the morning sun peeping through the sails of distant boats and birds all around you.

It was only by 1 p.m. that we all returned to the shore and sat down to discuss the foils of the day. All of us combined had seen about 100 species of waterbirds. The twitchers in our group were very thrilled for an Indian skimmer - a new record

for Nalsarovar Bird Sanctuary - had been seen that day. Some other interesting species recorded were great crested grebes and a golden plover. But those who had participated in the previous counts were disappointed that the population of common cranes this year was low, only 2000 compared to ca 32,000 seen in some of the earlier counts.

In our post-count meeting a point was raised that since certain types of birds (such as those which remain hidden in the reeds, for example) end up in being under represented in the census, the methods should be suitably modified to take this discrepancy into account. Interestingly, the organizers have been changing the methodology, probably for good reasons, starting with a sampling approach in 1992 (unstage stratified systematic sampling, to use the technical jargon) and moving over to a whole count in 2000. While the intention of counting everything properly is a good one, reality is, alas, very different.

One of the key features of any ecological monitoring programme is that its objectives are set well in advance and it has to be sustained for a certain period of time, a decade or more (Goldsmith, 1991). Due to this reason the methodology has to be kept constant otherwise you end up comparing apples with oranges from year to year. Also, bird censuses on a large scale are a costly and time consuming operation and in any general count (as against a species specific one) certain drawbacks will always be there. Statisticians often talk about accuracy and precision. Ideally one would want counts to be both accurate and precise. But some would argue that since true accuracy is difficult to achieve in practice, striving for precision, by keeping the error term constant is ok. At least you are comparing apples with apples.

At the end of the day we parted, happy at having spent an exciting weekend and met fellow birdwatchers from distant parts of the state. I may end by saying that the Gujarat forest department is not unique in organizing bird counts at important wetlands, as indeed several other states are also doing it. But perhaps what is laudable in Gujarat is the large scale participation of volunteers and the acknowledgment of their expertise by the forest department. Many birdwatchers, in the pursuit of rarities end up in reducing birdwatching to an activity akin to stamp collecting. But by participating in useful programs like bird counts their skills are put to good use for the conservation of bird habitats.

#### Acknowledgments

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**The Crows**

What is there that can be said about them? Have they not sufficiently cast a shadow on our lives, left their black mark on our pleasantest memories, yea, even their scars on our dispositions and tempers? Yet it is impossible to pass them over. I can call up no vision of Indian life without crows. Fancy refuses to conjure up the little bungalow at Dustypore in a happy state of crowlessness. And if the mind wanders away to other times and distant scenes, the crow pursues it. It is sitting impudently in the hotel window, it is walking without leave in at the open door of the traveller's bungalow, it is promenading in front of the tent, under the mango tree. Only when in thought we go back to happy rambles away from the hum of men,

*Where things that own not man's dominion dwell,  
and mortal foot hath ne'er or rarely been,*

is the horrid phantom absent. On the breezy hill-top, with its scented grass, its ferns and wild flowers, down in the solemn ravine, where the 'whistling schoolboy' tunes its mellow throat and the clucking spurfowl starts away among the rustling leaves, you meet no crow. The air is too pure and the calmness too sweet. The crow is a fungus of city life, a corollary to man and sin. It flourishes in the atmosphere of great municipalities, and is not wanting in the odorous precincts of the obscure village innocent of all conservancy.

Many of our frontier tribes have unpleasant traits of character, and in some the catalogue of vices is long and the redeeming virtues are few. But the crow differs from them all in that it is utterly abandoned. I have never been able to discover any shred of grace about a crow. And what aggravates this state of things is the imposture of its outward appearance. It affects to be respectable and entirely ignores public opinion, dresses like a gentleman, carries itself jauntily, and examines everything with one eye in a way which will certainly bring on an eye-glass in time, if there is a scrap of truth in the development theory. But for this defiance of shame one might feel disposed to make allowances for the unhappy influences of its life; for, in truth, it would be strange if a crow developed an amiable character. Even a consistent career of crime must be less demoralizing than the aimless vagabondage by which it maintains itself. It begins the day by watching the verandah where you take your *chota hazrce*, in hope to steal the toast. When that hope is disappointed it wings its way to the bazaar, where it contends with another crow for the remains of a dead bandicoot flattened by a passing cartwheel. Then, recollecting that the breakfast hour is near, it hurries back, not to lose its chance of an eggshell or a fishbone. On the way it notices a new-fledged sparrow trying its feeble wings, and, pouncing

## Crows, Babblers, Sparrows & Mynas

(Extract by Lt. Gen. P.S. Joshi, Commandant, The College of Combat, Mhow, Madhya Pradesh 453 441)  
From 'British Life in India', An anthology. Edited by R.V. Verma, OUP, Delhi, 1955.

down ruthlessly, it carries the helpless little sinner away to a convenient bough, where it sits and pulls it to pieces and affects not to hear the pitiful screams of the heartbroken parents. Later on it is watching a little stream of water by the roadside and plucking out small fishes as they pass, or it is vexing a frog in a paddy field, or it has spied a swarm of flying ants and is sitting down with a mixed company to supper. For another instance, take the following, which I myself witnessed, and say if anybody could have a hand in such a transaction and preserve his self-respect. A large garden lizard had wandered unwisely far from its tree, when two crows observed it and saw their advantage. They alighted at once and introduced themselves, like a couple of card-sharers. Then the lizard also took in the situation, and, wheeling about, made for the nearest trees. 'Not so fast,' quoth one of the crows, and with three sidelong hops, caught the tip of its tail and pulled it back again. Then the lizard reddened to the ears with offended dignity, and swelling like the frog in the fable, squared up for the fight; for lizards are no cowards. But the crows had not the least intention of fighting. They remained as cool as cucumbers and merely took up positions on opposite sides of the lizard. The advantage of this formation was that, if it presented its front to the one, it had to present its tail to the other, and so, as often as it charged, it was quietly replaced on the spot from which it started. Now, to be continually making valiant rushes forward and continually getting pulled back by your tail must be very discouraging, and after half an hour or so the lizard was evidently quite sick of the situation. But as its spirits sank the crows' spirits rose. Their familiarities grew more and more gross, they pulled it about, poked it in the ribs, cawed in its very face and finally turned it over on its back, with its white breast towards the sky, and were preparing to carve it, when suddenly the squirrel gave a shrill warning, a panic seized the hens, and the two miscreants just had time to dart aside, one this way and one that, as a kite, with whirlwind swoop, dashed between them and bore away the lizard in its talons. They stared after it with a gape of utter nonplussation.

I do not know about the Afghans, but a policy of masterly inactivity will not do for the crows. Their peculations and insolence always extend to the limits of your toleration, and they keep themselves acquainted with those limits by experiment. I go in for keeping up my prestige with them. I shoot a crow once a month or so and hang it up *in terrem*. This has such an excellent effect that no crow ever sits on my window and gives three guttural caws in the caverns of its throat, with intent to insult, as they do at other people's houses; nor are their evening convocations held on my roof.

In April and May crows make nests of sticks and line them with coir, or horsehair extracted from a mattress, or even with soda water wire stolen from the butler's little hoard! In these

they bring up three or four callow criminals in their own image. I make all such proceedings penal about my premises, for the chains of a hungry family will drive crows to even more reckless wickedness than their own inbred depravity. They will appropriate hens' eggs, murder nestling pigeons, attempt the life of the canary, and every now and then startle you with some entirely new and unthinkable felony.

Most young things in nature are engaging. We grow more unlovely as we grow older. What is prettier than a downy chicken, a precocious kid, a young mouse not an inch long, or that little woolly image of comfort, an infant rabbit, when it first shows its round face at the door of the nursery? But new fledged crows are a startling exception to the rule. They are graceless crudities, with glazed eyes and raw red throats, which they show you about three times a minute, when they open their mouths to emit an inane caw. They should be put to death offhand.

All the above remarks refer of course to the grey-necked crow. To make them applicable to the large black crow, they must be discounted ten to fifteen per cent. There is some sturdiness of character in the black crow; it is a downright, above-board blackguard and my feelings towards it have some semblance of respect.

#### *The Seven Sisters (The Babbler Thrushes Malacocircus)*

As busy as the mynas, but less silent in their working, are these sad-coloured birds, hopping about in the dust and incessantly talking while they hop. They are called by the natives 'The Seven Sisters', and seem to have always some little difference on hand to settle. Fighting? Not at all; do not be misled by the tone of voice. That heptachord clamour is not the expression of any strong feelings. It is only a way they have. They always exchange their commonplaces as if their next neighbour was out of hearing. If they could but be quiet they might pass for the bankers among the birds. They look so very respectable. But though they dress so soberly, their behaviour is unseemly. The Seven Sisters pretend to feed on insects, but that is only when they cannot get peas. Look at them now! The whole family, a septemvirate of sin, among your marrow-fat peas, gobbling and gabbling. And it is of no use to expel them - they will return. When it is night they will go off with a great deal of preliminary talk to their respective boarding-houses, for these birds, though at times as quarrelsome as Sumatrans during the pepper harvest, are sociable and lodge together. The weak point of this arrangement is that often a bird - perhaps the middle one of a long row of closely packed snoozers - has a bad dream, or loses his balance, and instantly the shock flashes along the line. The whole dormitory blazes up at once with indignation, and much bad language is bandied about promiscuously in the dark. The abusive shower at length slackens, and

querulous monosyllables and indistinct animal noises take the place of the septemfluous (Fuller has sanctified the word) vituperation, when some individual, tardily exasperated at the unseemly din, lifts up his voice in remonstrance, and rekindles the smouldering fire. Sometimes he suddenly breaks off suggesting to a listener the idea that his next neighbour had silently kicked him but more often the mischief is irreparable, and the din runs its course, again dwindles away, and is again relit, perhaps more than once, before all heads are safely again under wing.

#### *The Sparrow*

'The sparrow,' said Luther, 'is a most voracious animal, and does great harm to the crops. The Hebrews call it "tschirp", and it should be killed wherever found.' It is Emile Souvestre who calls the sparrow 'the nightingale of the roofs', and says that 'our chimney-pots are his forests, and our slate his grass plots', but I incline to take less lenient view of the genus *Passer*. As we resent the likeness to ourselves which the monkey tribe possess, so we feel injured by the familiar communism of the sparrow. He professes to move on the same plane with man — our chimney-pots are his chimney-pots and our slates his slates, but our forests and grass-plots are none the less his also. There is in his deportment none of the deference of a stranger when he crosses your threshold. His entry is that of a conqueror into a hostile city. He begins by putting himself on an equality with you, but soon arrogates superiority. He holds that man by natural selection will develop into the sparrow, but in his present hybrid state criticizes him as the fool who builds houses for the wise sparrow. Show me a man's house and I will show you a sparrow's castle; point out, if you can, a stable which the sparrow does not share with the horses.

He is the gamin of birds — chief vagabond of the air. He it is who crowds without payment into places of public amusement, disturbs Divine Service by a fracas with his kind on the altar rails, or perches above the Commandments and chirps monotonously through the sermon. His cranial development is very poor — flat atop, showing a deplorable lack of respect; bulgy behind, typical of gross amazement and gluttony; and putty at the sides where lodge the devils of destructiveness, evil-speaking, lying and slandering. This Bohemian communist has broken through — worn out — the resentment of man; we no longer resist his intrusions or retaliate for his rapine. He has acquired a prescriptive right to be iniquitous and go unpunished. But he does not understand this. In his conceit he insolently imagines that he has compelled acquiescence and treats us as a conquered race. In another world he will be met with strolling in the valley of Jehoshaphat, flower in hand — the badge of one who has benefited his fellow-men — will swagger through the fields of amaranth and moly, and take to himself more than his share of asphodel.

### The Mynas

There are undoubtedly among the feathered race some to whom a Republic would present itself as the more perfect form of government, and to none more certainly than to the Mynas. The myna is, although a moderate, a very decided republican, for sober in mind as well as in apparel, he sets his face against such vain frivolities as the tumbling of pigeons, the meretricious dancing of peafowl, and the gaudy bedizement of the minivets, holding that life is real, life is earnest, and while worms are to be found beneath the grass, to be spent in serious work. The myna, therefore, views with some displeasure the dilettante hawking of bee-eaters and the leisurely deportment of the crow-pheasant; cannot be brought to see the utility of the luxurious hoopoe's crest, and loses all patience with the koel-cuckoo for his idle habit of spending his forenoons in tuning his voice. For the patient kingfisher he entertains a moderate respect, and he holds in esteem the industrious woodpecker; but the scapegrace parrot is an abomination to him and, had he the power, he would altogether exterminate the race of humming-birds for their trifling over lilies. Life with him is all work. Of course he has a wife, and she celebrates each anniversary of spring by presenting him with a nestful of young mynas, but her company rather subdues and sobers him than makes him frivolous or giddy, for as the myna is, his wife is — of one complexion of feather and mind. A pair of mynas remind one of a Dutch burgher and his frau. They are comfortably dressed, well fed, of a grave deportment, and so respectable that scandal hesitate to whisper their name. In the empty babble of the Seven Sisters, the fruitless controversies of finches, the blathering of amatory sparrows (every sparrow is at heart a rake), or the turmoil of kites, they take no part — holding aloof alike from the monarchical exclusiveness of the jealous *Raptora* and the democrat communism of the crows. The

myna shrinks from the neighbourhood of the strong and resents the companionship of the humble. He comes of a race of poor antecedents, and he has no lineage worth boasting of. The crow has Greek and Latin memories, and for the antiquity of the sparrow we have the testimony of Holy Writ. It is true that in the stories of India the myna has frequent and honourable mention; but the authors speak of the hill-bird — a notable fowl with strange powers of mimicry, and always a favourite with the people — and not the homely Quaker bird who so diligently searches our grass-plots, and may be seen from dawn to twilight, busy at his appointed work — the consumption of little grubs. The lust of the green parrot for orchard brigandage, or of the proud stomached king-crow for battle with his kind, are as whimsical caprices, fancies of the moment, when compared to the steady assiduity with which this Puritan bird pursues the object of his creation. And the result is that the myna has no wit. Intelligence is his of a high order, for busy as he may be, the myna describes before all others the far-away speck in the sky which will grow into a hawk, and it is from the myna's cry of alarm that the garden becomes first aware of the danger that is approaching. But wit he has none. His only way of catching a worm is to lay hold of its tail and pull it out of its hole — generally breaking it in the middle, and losing the bigger half. At night the mynas socially congregate together; and, with a clamour quite unbecoming their character, make their arrangements for the night, contending for an absolute equality even in sleep.

Has it ever struck you how fortunate it is for the world of birds that of the twenty-four hours some are passed in darkness? And yet without the protection of night the earth would be assuredly depopulated of small birds, and the despots, whom the mynas detest, would be left alone to contest in internecine conflict the dominion of the air.



## Redheaded Falcon Sightings in Kutch

J.K. TIWARI

Asst. Manager (Wildlife & Environment), Nature Conservation Centre, Sanghi Cements, Sanghipuram, Moti-Ber, Abdasa, Kutch, Gujarat 370 655

The redheaded falcon *Falco chicquera* is seen in Kutch in the well-wooded areas. Although this species is not common in Kutch, it is distributed in the entire district ranging from the fringes of the great and little Rann to the Banni grasslands as well as the coastal belt, the tropical thorn forest, and the irrigated fields. The excessive use of organo-chlorine and other lethal insecticides to control the crop pests is becoming the main cause of concern for both the insectivorous birds and the birds of prey.

Some interesting observations were made on the behaviour of the redheaded falcon over the past ten years (see Table 1). They nest on the desi babool tree or tamarind tree (3 nests seen so far). The house crows were seen harassing the nesting falcons, in one case the nest was abandoned after one chick was killed by the house crows at Chachlo village.

The future of the birds of prey could be safe atleast in the tropical thorn forest areas of Kutch. But the forest clearance



by the locals for agriculture and the use of insecticides need to be checked in the interest of both insectivorous birds and birds of prey.



Table 1 - Redheaded falcon sightings in Kutch

Date	Place	Nos. sighted	Remarks
08.01.90	Fulay	1	Feeding on a bluehmat.
15.07.90	Devisar	1	Near Nakhrana town.
14.09.90	Mori-bet	1	One small bird in its talons.
25.07.92	Vakeria	1	Male found dead on the road.
10.08.92	Lala Bustard Sanctuary	2	Male and female.
06.09.92	Chhar-Dhand	1	Near a Wetland.
16.12.92	Janan Khadir Bet	1	Perched on a Salvadora tree.
18.12.92	Banni	3	Near Fulay.
20.12.92	Gadhra	1	Khadir.
21.12.90	Chhar-Dhand	1	Feeding on a little stint. The little stint had a ring in its tarsus.
22.12.92	Naliya Dadmapur	2	Male and female.
22.12.92	Lala village	2	Male and female.
10.03.93	Chachlo Banni	2	On a nest, one chick was predated by house crows.
07.07.93	Keera fulay	2	Male and female preying on locusts.
01.10.93	Keera	2	Male and female.
19.03.94	Fulay village	1	On a nest, <i>Acacia nilotica</i> tree 3 eggs.
09.06.98	Chhar-Dhand	1	At the time of sunset 1 male followed our jeep to feed on the flushed insects.
05.09.98	Moli-bet	2	On neem tree.
02.10.90	Ramvada	2	Nest on tamarind tree.
	Naroda	2	Village pond.
	Mouana	2	Agriculture field.

## CORRESPONDENCE

**WHITEBACKED VULTURES IN THE THROES OF AN UNIDENTIFIED MALADY IN THE BALARAM AMBAJI WILDLIFE SANCTUARY IN BANASKANTHA DISTRICT, GUJARAT.** LIMA HOSALIND, Centre for Environment Education, Nehru Foundation for Development, Thaltej Tekra, Ahmedabad 380 051

The Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary is located in the north-eastern tip of Banaskantha District covering an area of 541 sq. kms. The sanctuary lies in the semi arid biogeographic zone (WII classification). The topography ranges from 167-1090m. above mean sea level. The area forms the western end of the Aravalli range which forms a natural boundary to the expanding Thar desert. Balaram and Ambaji are two important pilgrim centres in the sanctuary of the same name.

River Sabarmati originates from the Aravalli Hills in Rajasthan and flows along the eastern border separating Banaskantha and Sabarkantha districts.

Both tropical moist deciduous forests and tropical dry deciduous forests occur in Ambaji range. The entire area is hilly and littered with rocks and huge boulders. The whole area is littered with mines for marble quarrying and marble processing industry which is the mainstay for employment opportunities in the region.

A team from the Centre for Environmental Education had visited the area to explore the possibilities of conducting

outdoor education and interpretation activities for those visiting the sanctuary. On 19th August '99 afternoon when on a field visit along with the beat officers of the sanctuary I came across whitebacked vultures sitting atop the trees. I as usual counted their numbers but for a moment I felt the posture of the vultures was not right. In all my vulture watching years (I had put in some years in the Bird Hazard to Aircrafts Project while in the Bombay Natural History Society (BNHS) and have watched vultures and kites sitting on the tarmac of the Juhu airport and every other dumping ground I could lay my eyes on!) I had never seen the vulture necks droop to such low heights! Every thing was not alright with these birds I thought. What with the vulture watchers crying hoarse about the state of vultures in the Bharatpur sanctuary, I checked with the Indian Vulture Specialist Group - a newly constituted group in the BNHS to exchange information on the vultures. Dr. Vibhu Prakash, Principal Scientist BNHS states that the vultures appear to be stricken by a disease with symptoms that include the birds sitting lethargically with their heads hanging low. This condition lasts for about 30-35 days after which the birds die. What I had seen then in the Balaram Ambaji Wildlife Sanctuary is a group of 30 vultures stricken with this disease. Two to three individuals did not seem stricken by the disease yet and appeared in their normal sitting posture.

The Balaram Ambaji area is a major pilgrim centre, with thousands of pilgrims visiting the place during the "shrawan month". There are no facilities for the pilgrims either to rest or bathe. As most pilgrims come from different parts of the state they normally take a dip in the Saraswati river which passes

through the sanctuary. They bathe in the open, wash their clothes etc. This activity coupled with the mining activity has probably aggravated the already fragile ecosystem around the park and probably the denizens of the park as well. This needs further investigation.

♦ ♦ ♦

**ALEXANDRINE PARAKEETS IN DELHI J.L. SINGH, D-3/1,  
Rites Flats, Ashok Vihar (Phase 3), Delhi 110 052**

I was posted in Delhi in the early 80s and now, after a gap of almost 15 years, I am here once again. My Delhi birding experiences are thus spread over two decades.

One of my favourite haunts has been the Lodi Garden, and not only for the opportunity to watch birds. This was, and still is, a fairly well-kept garden with good paths for walking. In addition, there are a number of monuments of the Lodi and Sayyid periods of Delhi's history that make the park interesting.

Among the more prominent monuments is the Bara Gumbad. This looks like a tomb but is actually the gateway to an adjoining mosque. Built in the late 15th century, it is an excellent example of the architectural style of that period. During my visits to the park in the early 80s, I had noted that a pair of Alexandrine parakeets (*Psittacula eupatria*) were nesting in a crevice near the top of the eastern wall of the Bara Gumbad, just below the dome. There was no mistaking the deep red patch on the shoulders and the rose pink collar of the male. It was obviously bigger than the commoner rose-ringed parakeet (*P. krameri*) and with a more massive red bill. Over a three-year period from 1981 to 1984, I had seen this pair fairly often in or near this crevice or in the surrounding large trees, of which the Lodi Garden has a good number.

I visited the Lodi Garden again in March this year (2000), after a gap of more than 15 years. I found that there was a pair of Alexandrine parakeets in exactly the same area near the east wall of the Bara Gumbad. I did not stay in the Park long enough to see if it was using the same crevice as I had seen a decade and a half back, but the pair was in the tree nearest the wall in which the crevice is.

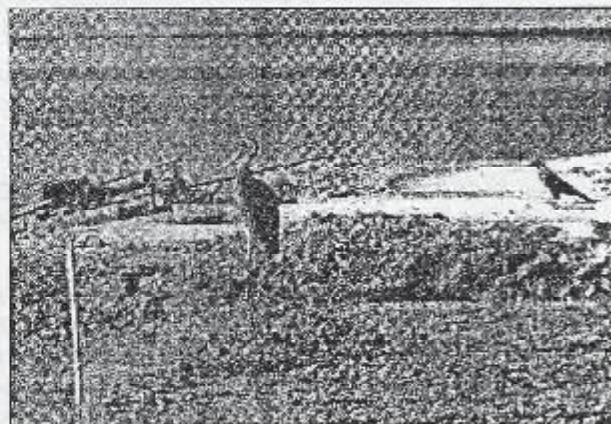
I am wondering if this is the same pair that I had seen earlier. I expect that some readers have more information on whether parakeets continue nesting in the same spot year after year for periods of up to 15-20 years. I would be happy to know.

Another interesting item I would like to report is that in the course of the short one-hour walk in the park, I was able to see as many as 3 pairs of grey hornbills (*Tockus birostris*). Normally you see one, and sometimes two, pairs in a corresponding period.

♦ ♦ ♦

**OCCURRENCE OF BLACK STORK *CICONIA NIGRA* (LINNAEUS) IN KOLE WETLANDS OF THRISSUR, KERALA. DR. E.A. JAYSON, Kerala Forest Research Institute, Peechi 680 653, Kerala**

Kole wetland in Thrissur district is one of the important wintering grounds for migratory birds in Kerala. The area lies in between  $10^{\circ} 20'$  and  $10^{\circ} 40'$  latitude and  $75^{\circ} 58'$  and  $76^{\circ} 11'$  E longitude, extending to about 11,000 ha. Kole wetlands are situated below sea level and paddy is cultivated during the months of October to April, after draining water. During monsoon season (June to September) the whole area is inundated. As a part of detailed ecological studies on wetland birds, surveys were initiated in the year 1998. During the surveys black stork *Ciconia nigra* was recorded from the area, on 4.1.2000. The species was sighted feeding in the mudflats along with a flock of eight whitenecked stork *Ciconia episcopus*, little egret (*Egretta garzetta*) and median egret (*Egretta intermedia*). Painted stork (*Mycteria leucocephala*), openbilled stork (*Anastomus oscitans*) and white stork (*Ciconia ciconia*) were also recorded from this area during our studies. The sighted black stork was an immature with dark brown head, neck and upper breast. The tip of each wing feather was pale in colour. The mantle was dull brownish black; the under parts were white and the beak and legs were yellowish. The species is a rare winter visitor to the Thrissur Kole wetland. During this study we recorded 30 species of winter visitors in the Kole wetlands, which showed the importance of the area as a wintering ground for migratory birds of the Central Asian-Indian flyway (Anonymous, 1996).



Review of literature revealed that Ali (1984) has not reported black stork from Kerala. Kurup (1989) had recorded the species from Thekkady in Periyar Tiger Reserve. Other than these previous records of the species in Kerala were from Parambikulam and Walayur in Palakkad District, Chamaravattam in Malapuram District, (Neelakantan et al.

1993). This is the first record of black stork from Kole wetlands of Thrissur which is in the coastal plains of Kerala.

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♦ ♦ ♦

**BLACK HEADED ORIOLE FEEDING YOUNG INDIAN CUCKOO.** K.V. ELDHOSE, Kavumgampalil House, P.O. Box 25, Keerampara P.O., Ernakulam Dist., Kerala

This is to report a rare sighting of a south Indian black headed oriole (*Oriolus xanthornus maderaspatus*) feeding a young Indian cuckoo (*Cuculus micropterus micropterus*).

This was first seen on 21-5-2000 and continued on 22-5-2000 and 23-5-2000, near Kalappara timber depot, two kms. before the Thattekad Bird Sanctuary at Ernakulam Dist., in Kerala.

The young Indian cuckoo is easily identified by its habit of wagging its tail like a puppy, while begging and feeding.

A Ceylon black headed oriole feeding a young Indian cuckoo has been reported. (Hand Book Vol. III).

I would be interested to hear from readers about similar sightings.

♦ ♦ ♦

**GREEN MUNIA.** AESHITA MUKHERJEE and C.K. BORAD, National Tree Growers Cooperative Federation Ltd., NDDP Campus, Anand 388 001, Gujarat

The globally threatened green munia *Estrilda formosa* is a rare bird seen in Gujarat with very few sightings. Ali (1955) has recorded the bird at Palanpur, Navagam and Dediapara in Gujarat, but there are no reports of sightings from Kutch or Saurashtra. Monga and Naoroji (1984) have seen the bird thrice in the low vegetation along Mozda river near Dediapara. They did not notice any sign of breeding.

There is no detailed study available of this species. However, recently a sighting near Mt. Abu appeared in NLBW (Lodhiya 1999). Every record of this bird, whether new, or a confirmation of the existing data, is significant.

On June 6th, 1999 a pair of green munias was seen near the water outlet of Mayo Hospital in EME 'B' company campus, Baroda. The pair was quietly sitting on a bushy shrub of *Lowsonia alba* adjacent to an open wasteland. Next morning we tried to spot the pair again and after a brief search we confirmed its presence in the adjacent field (open land with bushes) about 300 m from the place of sighting on the previous day.

The report by Abrar Ahmed (1998) clearly indicates that trapping is a major threat to the green munia population. Probably this could be one important reason behind its rarity.

#### Acknowledgment

We are thankful to Dr. B.M. Parasharya for going through the note.

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**BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT: REJOINDER.** LAVKUMAR KHACHER, 646, Vasunirman, Gandhinagar 382 022

Today, 16th April 2000 is a day rather heavy on my hand since I am all packed to go away tomorrow to the Himalayas. I also feel a little sad to leave all the birds who come to feed on the food I put out. There is just no way I can ensure that they get handouts, but if it is depressing to say farewell to all these friends I anticipate joining the exuberant paradise flycatchers and the whistling thrushes. So with a long hot afternoon ahead I was more than pleased to get Vol. 40, No. 2, March/April 2000 of the NL and to find Gopi Sundar taking me to task on my "denounce"ing Grimmett et al's book. Firstly, I have not "denounced" the huge effort which this book most assuredly is but I still stand by my comments on the book being too heavy to be carried around and for the pocket. If one can afford the money, the first buy should be a pair of good binoculars, and a regular going out birdwatching.

To cut things short, the authors sensing the possible hesitation have brought out a pocket edition. One was sent out to me by one of my young ecolites. This book is indeed convenient to carry; its distribution maps are clear and do not need a magnifying lens, and the book certainly mingles well on my shelf with the European Field Guides. However, I still find the illustrations of raptors, gulls and terns, warblers, pipits very inadequate and, can I ask Gopi Sundar to help novices to find the rufous bellied babbler - those charming little birds that visit me regularly. And, what about the spotted babbler? As

for the book's "crossing of borders into Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka" all the old books also dealt with the subcontinent. In any case, with the downsizing, the book is now worth purchasing. As I had said in my "denunciation" earlier "the illustrations are far superior to any of the earlier books" but, it would have been far more reassuring if we were told that the exotic sounding Heuglin's gull was the eastern race of the better known herring gull (or is it?) and had it not been for my knowing that our great black headed gull was *Larus ichthyaetus* I would have gone bonkers looking for it with its new name the Peila's gull. The greatest criticism of this book is that it covers the area of Salim Ali's Handbook and so as a consideration to us a cross reference should have been provided. Also, a pocket guide cannot be informative to be a reference book. The pocket guide is worth possessing by field trampers. The old book I meted out "harsh treatment" will be a pretty object on the shelf or good for thumbing through by the "armchair" birdwatcher. Nothing more.

♦ ♦ ♦

**BROWN ROCK CHAT CERCOMELA FUSCA : EXTENSION OF RANGE INTO GUJARAT.** LAVKUMAR KHACHER, 646, Vastunirman, Gandhinagar 382 022

On Sunday 20th February, visiting a friend in Vadodara, I noticed a brown bird atop a telephone pole just outside the gate. The characteristic motionless stance and a very sharp bill is shared with the larger female blue rock thrush *Monticola solitarius* and the uniform brown resembles a female Indian robin *Saxicola fulicata* of the same size. Its smaller size and the brown colour separates the chat from the female thrush, and the fact that the tail is not raised above the back but instead, slowly raised and lowered, separates it from the female robin. All three species can be seen together. During my student days in Delhi I had brown rock chats fearlessly enter my room and hunt among the books for mosquitos and so, I am very familiar with the bird, and I knew I was seeing an old friend. After a while, it flew up to the top of the house and my identification was confirmed on 21st February morning. I was awakened by a thrush like song and going out saw the chat at close hand. It flew down to the gate where it was joined by, presumably its mate. Nearby, a female Indian robin was rummaging on a rubble heap and I had a wonderful opportunity to compare the two species.

Since brown rock chats are resident, I suspect I was watching a resident pair. Birdwatchers in central Gujarat and those visiting the Pawagadh Hill should give every female Indian robin a second glance. There is all likelihood of the rock chat being more widespread in Gujarat than its hitherto known presence in Kachchh, the rock outcrops in north Gujarat south of Mt. Abu.

Being an endemic species, we need to have information of the brown rock chat's presence in Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh and the Punjab and adjoining Rajasthan.

Birdwatchers in Vadodara might contact Ashok Goradia of the Convent of Jesus and Mary with a request to be shown the resident chats in his neighbourhood. One should assume this chat is common in and around Vadodara and is largely overlooked as being an ubiquitous Indian robin.

♦ ♦ ♦

**VULTURE WATCH IN KUTCH.** S.N. VARU and J.K. TIWARI, Temple Street, Junavas, Madhapur, Kutch, Gujarat - 370 020.

The decline in vulture population over the last few years was brought to our notice by the articles written in Down to Earth by Dr. Rahmani and in Hornbill by Dr. Vibhu Prakash. No one ever thought that birds like vultures would one day become a threatened species. Whatever may be the reason (disease or overuse of organochlorine insecticides in our agricultural lands), the result is alarming.

Four resident species of vultures occur in Kutch district viz. white-rumped vulture, long-billed vulture, king vulture and Egyptian vulture. Two migratory species come to Kutch i.e. Cinereous and Griffon vulture. Looking at the sight records of vultures in the district in the last decade we realised that there was a general decline also in the number of sightings and number of individuals in each sighting. The general decline in numbers could be attributed to the over use of insecticides in agriculture and use of hazardous chemicals by the cattle-grazers to kill the predator species like wolves. The Maldharis mix poison in the carcass to kill the wolves and the contaminated flesh is eaten by all the scavengers including the vultures.

The two disastrous cyclones in Kutch, (9th June 1998 and 19th and 20th May 1999) took a heavy toll including vultures. At least 50 vultures died in Naliya town. The vultures are a very hardy species and, we have observed white-rumped vultures struggling on trees for over 24 to 36 hours standing strong cyclone-winds and heavy rains. The non-stop rains and strong winds took a toll of thousands of parakeets, doves and small passerines apart from vultures.

Very interestingly, the white rumped vulture is the species which nests on the trees but here in Abdosa taluka at some places like Naliya, Jakhau, Lala etc they are observed nesting on house tops. The houses are not the abandoned ones. Vultures make nests in the middle of busy markets. The house-owners are generally Jains who believe in non-violence. This type of nesting is perhaps not reported elsewhere.

During the last cyclone in Kutch, it was observed that about 20,000 cattle died. Hazardous chemicals like the DDT & DHC was used by certain Government agencies to dispose off the carcasses. This caused a heavy damage to scavengers like vultures.

On many occasions we have come across dead vultures lying near the carcasses of cattle. Near Moti-Virani town of Kutch about 10 white-rumped vultures were seen dead near a dead cow. On 20th March 2000, I (JKT) came across a soaring concentration of 350 white-backed and long-billed vultures near the Sayan village and on 22nd March this year 160 vultures were observed soaring near Moti-ber village in Abdasa taluka. These two sightings could suggest a recovery in vulture populations (?) at least in some small pocket of Kutch district.

Vulture watch groups should be formed in all parts of the country as suggested by the BNHS.

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**HOMAGE TO AN UNCOMMON BIRDWATCHER - LATE SUSHILA BAI ADIGE.** S. RANGASWAMI, Rishi Valley Education Centre, Rishi Valley 517 352, A.P.

Grief beyond words overtook me when I read in the obituary column of *The Hindu* dated 5 May last that Smt. Sushila Bai Adige passed away. She was not only an avid birdwatcher but also a lifelong learner. I came to know her only through her application for joining the Home Study Course in Ornithology (May - Oct 96) in which she had given her date of birth as 14.6.1921 and had stated, in all humility, that though she had accompanied Dr. Salim Ali on many birding sessions and could identify a few birds, she knew very little about birds as such. Hence her desire to join the course. I should add that she has been a regular subscriber of NLBW all along and her name is still in the list.

Deeming it a privilege to have as my student, a lady of such rare avidity for augmenting her knowledge of birds despite her advanced age (78 yrs) I wrote to her that I was exempting her from Part II of the final test which entailed field study and instead I would like her to send a brief narrative about her birdwatching experiences with Dr. Salim Ali for its archival value. (It is given below).

She submitted her test answers - for both the mid course and the final tests, well ahead of the dates assigned and sought to be excused for taking the help of her friend Mrs. V. Das for the first test and of her daughter-in-law Brinda for making a computer print out of her answers for the final test, saying "I am sorry I was unable to write the answers in my own hand, my writing is so bad that even I cannot decipher some of it when I revise it." In her letter of 28.10.99 she added "I thank

you and all involved in making this course possible. I have enjoyed it and am richer in my knowledge. I wish you many more years of fruitful studies and pursuit of birds." I sent her the certificate without a day's delay.

The joy I experienced on receiving her letter is ineffable. The thought that such a senior birdwatcher, with such intense and insatiable thirst for knowledge till the last days of her life chose to be my student inspires me and gives me a sense of fulfillment as no other experience of mine so far in the eight decades of my life has given. The Newsletter fraternity offer their condolences to the bereaved family.

Reg. No. 375, Part II, Dr. Salim Ali and I

"See that small olive brown bird skulking in the tea bushes? That is a spotted babbler." "Look at that slender built uncrested eagle, dark brown above and white below, it is a Bonelli's hawk eagle." "See that smart little fellow strikingly coloured? He is the black and orange fly catcher. He is usually seen singly but often has his mate nearby". These and other nuggets of information on flora and fauna were told to me by the late Dr. Salim Ali.

Dr. Salim Ali was a simple, lovable person, full of humour. I hosted him twice in Coonoor in the Nilgiris where he had come to supervise his student Reza Khan, who was doing his thesis for Ph.D. on the black and orange flycatcher. When Dr. Salim Ali knew that I was a keen bird and nature watcher, he took me with him on his trips to various sholas and jungles. Two other students - Sugathan and Daniel also came from time to time, to work with Salim Ali. On one of the walks in a shola, Sugathan was busy collecting whatever was live and putting it in his specimen bag. One of these was a small snake. The three men admired it, identified it, stroked it, saying how nice it was. They then offered it to me for admiration and stroking. I, who had a healthy repulsion for snakes, found myself with three smiling men who were sure I would not touch it. Finally, after much urging and screwing-up courage, I touched it gingerly with one finger and found it was not slimy and I enjoyed touching it!

Dr. Salim Ali stayed with my son Narayan in Munnar. Of course, I was there. We went to see and photograph ibex and the Eravikulam Wildlife Sanctuary, reached by a seven mile narrow track, wet with the rain. We saw saddlebacks, sambar and flora like drocera.

We met him last at his house in Bombay in 1978. It was a great privilege and pleasure knowing Dr. Salim Ali.

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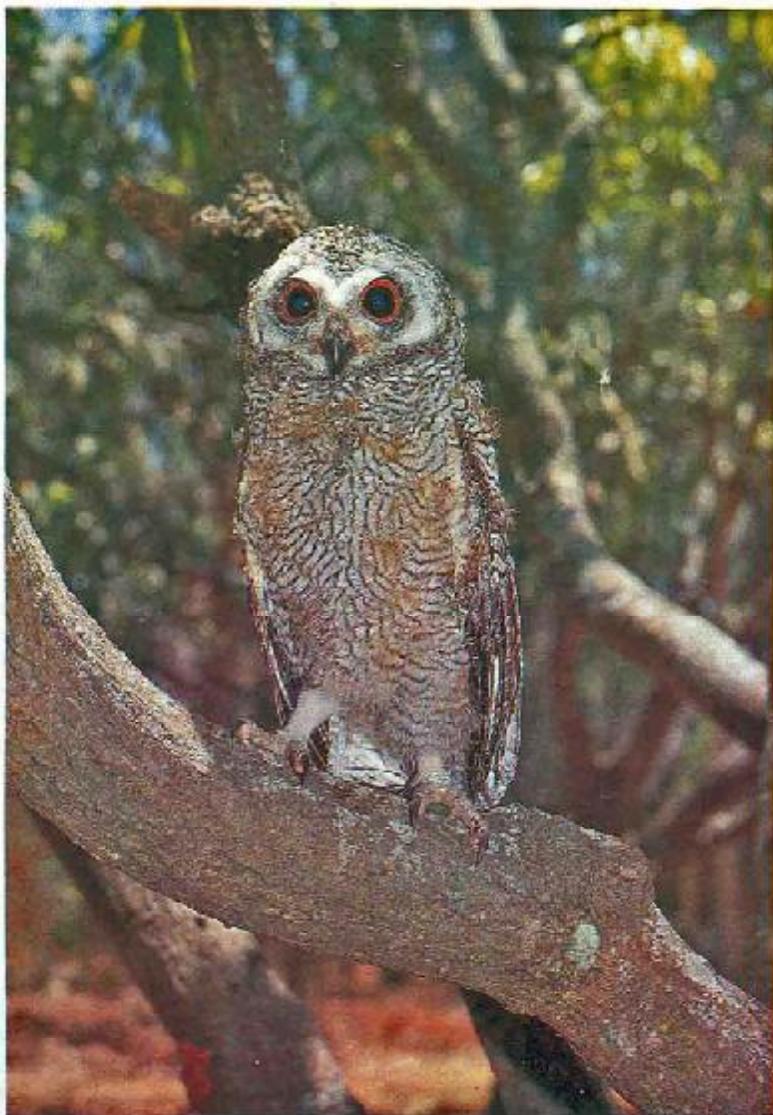
**Cover :** Canada Goose (*Branta canadensis*) One of the most common and familiar geese of North America, constantly expanding its range. Has a diagnostic black head and neck marked with a white 'chin strap'. Flocks of Canada Geese forage about lawns, grasslands and open marshes, often uttering loud resonant double notes "honk-a-tonk".

The bird was photographed at a lake in Farmington Hills, Michigan. The owners of a nearby house had provided a sand bar shelter under the window ledge, which was being utilized by the geese as their nesting site.

**Photo :** S. Sridhar, ARPS

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

Vol. 40 No. 4 July-August 2000



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## **Editorial**

### Nest-making by goldenbacked woodpeckers (New suggested name Flameback)

A detailed account of a day long watch (7.15 a.m. onwards on 15.5.2000 in Kihim), was sent by a friend. A pair was seen in the garden adjoining the beach. The birds landed on the trunk of a dead casuarina tree, one by one, about 15 ft. from the ground, and started excavating the nesting hole. By 11 a' clock

it was the size of a golf ball and as deep as the length of the bird's bill. What fascinated the observers was that prior to starting the pecking the woodpecker (perhaps the male) had made a design of the hole by pecking and marking the area within which the hole had to be excavated. For some reason this nesting site was abandoned after all the hard work of excavating a hole 2" in diameter and 4" deep. Curiously a second hole 1.6" dia. and 2" deep was made below the first hole. The hammering action of the neck and bill was so strong that the wood chips were strewn as far as 3 metres from the base of the tree.

### Birdlife Project on Threatened Birds

Dr. Michael Rands, Director & Chief Executive of BirdLife International, wrote :

"The Globally Threatened Species Programme is an ambitious and therefore costly project. One of the ways in which BirdLife is raising the funds to complete the Programme is to ask individuals, NGOs and Corporates to sponsor a species in Threatened Birds of the World. The sponsor will be acknowledged on the page of their selected species.

I am writing to ask if you would like to sponsor a species. It would be an honour for BirdLife to have you, as a member of the IOC, featured in Threatened Birds of the World. The leaflet enclosed gives further details of how to do this."

From the leaflet enclosed I find that a sum of £ 250/- (Rs. 16,500/-) would be required to sponsor a species. Will any member of the Newsletter, willing to contribute let me know.

I am prepared to make a modest contribution of Rs. 1,000/-, and if we get adequate funds we can then decide which bird to sponsor. Over 1200 birds are now globally threatened, several from India. In the Indian list there are such marvellous birds like the pinkheaded duck (probably extinct), Jerdon's courser, larger and lesser adjutant storks, the sarus crane, the beautiful nuthatch and several others. How about sponsoring the sarus crane, so involved with the life of our people. I see in our subscriber's list that there are a few software engineers and for them to pull out a few thousand pounds should be no problem. Let us decide quickly one way or the other, and inform BirdLife International.

### Selecting Material

As I said in my previous Editorial of May/June, the Newsletter will attempt to have articles which are a pleasure to read, and avoid heavy going statistic laden ones. Exceptions will be made of course when statistics and graphs are pleasantly interwoven within a web of good writing. It is not that we have suddenly become averse to scientific information. It is only because several new publications are now in the field and each should develop its own line and style. So if an article is badly written but contains interesting information, I will, if

necessary, send it back to the author for repair - something I have never done in all these 40 years - Minor tinkering will be done by the Editor.

At the same time novices and others whom the Editor feels need to be encouraged, will not be neglected, so our Newsletter will retain the character which it has had all along, a bit of a hotch potch, not by thoughtless editing but by design.

#### The Impact of Konkan Railway Project on the Avifauna of the Carambolim Lake in Goa

A well balanced report on the impact of the Konkan railway passing through the bird famous Carambolim Lake in Goa has been produced by A.B. Shanbhag, R. Walia, and S.D. Borges of Goa University. Their study commenced in 1996, when the "laying of tracks in the lake was in full steam", and continued up to June 1998, by when the work on the railway line had been completed. The lake is 12 km. from Panjim, and covers an area of 70 hectares, and is surrounded by cashew, coconut and mango plantations. A total of 92 species were sighted in the area, and as could be expected, as many as 54 species of terrestrial birds constituted only 1.5% of the total population, while just 34 species of aquatic birds accounted for 98.5% of the population.

The most significant point made by the report is that there was an increase in the overall population of birds in the lake after the railway project was completed as compared to previous years. Whistling teals for example, increased from 2738 in 1996 to 4957 in 1997. It is not suggested that railway tracks are an attraction for birds. But it is obvious that birds do get used to and even ignore human artefacts around their natural habitats provided they are not disturbed. The several railway lines going over Mahim Creek in Bombay did not deter gulls, terns, stilts and a variety of others including the great reed warbler (*Acrocephalus stentorius*) whose loud calls during winter announced its arrival from Kashmir. This is a report which will interest some of our readers and I am sure the authors in the Dept. of Zoology of Goa University (Pin : 403 206) will be happy to supply it at the cost of postage and xeroxing.

#### Decline of Red-whiskered Bulbuls in Thailand

In the special issue on Thailand June 2000 of the Oriental Bird Club, there is a letter about the serious decline in the number of red-whiskered bulbuls in Thailand. The bird belongs to the same species (*Pycnonotus jocosus*) which we have in India. The reduction in number is apparently due to the use of birds in singing contests and their capture in the wild for this purpose. When will people realise how much more enjoyable it is to listen to the merry calls of these birds when they are free, rather than to their cries for freedom when they are caged. I am surprised how many people see nothing wrong or cruel

in keeping birds in cages for their perverted personal amusement.

And this leads me to the question of why there are certain areas where these bulbuls abound, while in others, seemingly providing good natural cover and similar allied factors, there is never more than a pair. Can we design an ecologically satisfying garden for bulbuls? Which species of trees and shrubs, how much open land, what kind of bird bath and what kind of protection from crows and coucals for the nursery. Readers who are fortunate enough to have these lovely birds in their surroundings might attempt to offer suggestions. It might be a vain hope, but if we have a good design, we might be able to persuade the Municipality or a Corporate House to create a bulbul garden.

#### Peacocks and Pesticides

The newspapers of 8th and 9th July, carry reports of the deaths of over 79 peacocks in the U.P. as a result of eating jowar 'protected' by pesticides. Is it going to be a question of peacocks, or jowar? I hope that like the Americans who banned DDT after the death of their crested grebes on the lakes of Michigan as a result of the build up of DDT in the food chain, our Agricultural Extension Services will attempt to reduce the excessive use of synthetic chemicals to contain agricultural pests. One can understand the plight of farmers whose crops are sometimes destroyed completely by insect infestations wanting to use pesticides to protect their crops. Obviously if poisons meant to eliminate tiny insects have killed birds as large as peacocks, there has been excessive use which may ultimately harm humans as well. So often have birds, because of their faster metabolism, acted as pointers to dangers ahead. I recall (in the 60's) there were strong protests in England by conservationists against the use of Aldrin as seed dressing by farmers to protect their crops. A large number of seed eating birds had begun to be found dead in the fields. Aldrin was subsequently banned in the U.K. Let us attempt to make use of biological control as much as possible and aim to phase out unnatural strategies, specially in areas concerned with the production of food.

#### Twice Told

Sometime ago Brigadier R Lokaranjan (Retd.), an old friend of our Newsletter from Hyderabad suggested that I should reproduce occasionally some of the more interesting articles published in the past. I think this is a good idea and I will make a beginning with the article written by D. A. Stairmand in the February 1972 issue. This was followed by a response from R E Hawkins, R.S. Dharmakumareinhji and K.K. Neelakantan. Lack of space prevents the appearance of these articles in this issue but you will be happy to see them in the coming one.





**M**yanmar, our neighbour to the East, is almost a closed book as far as birds and ornithology are concerned. During the British period Burma was part of the Indian Empire and many Indians had either settled there or were there for business and employment. Burma closed its doors after it gained independence in 1948 and many Indians (and Chinese) either left the country on their own or were thrown out. Very few foreigners could gain access to the country since those times, and among them, bird-watchers and ornithologists were fewer still.

B.E. Smythies' *Birds of Burma*, first published during world war II in 1940 and again (2nd edition) in 1953 remains the only book that gives a comprehensive account of that country's bird life. In recent years some information has begun to trickle down as Myanmar is slowly opening its doors to foreign visitors. Recently published C. Robson's *A Field Guide to the Birds of Southeast Asia* contains some useful information on Myanmar's birds (though for some birds we found it to be not very accurate).

For its size Myanmar has one of the richest avifauna. Smythies gave an estimate of almost 1000 species. Birds that belong to Indian, Indochinese and Malaysian sub-regions of the Oriental realm constitute this avifauna. In addition, Palaearctic species including resident ones of Sino-Himalayas and migratory ones that breed further north, are also found in Myanmar.

The habitat composition of the country is probably responsible for this richness of the avifauna. Even today almost 50% of the country is forested. Forest types vary from evergreen to dry zone scrub and hill savanna. There are very few roads in Myanmar. We travelled for ten hours on one of their major roads which was probably no better or even worse than the unmetalled tracks in our sanctuaries and national parks. Absence of roads, tracks and settlements in the interior areas in mountains makes many forest areas inaccessible. It is probably here that Myanmar's wildlife including birds, live; and Myanmar is a country of mountains, hills, deep, narrow valleys, broad flood plains and plateau uplands. In the north are the mountains of the Himalayan chain, arching to south-east. The north-south ridges are scourged by the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy and their tributaries. Further east are the Shan uplands and the flood plain of the Salween. The southern part constitutes the deltaic regions of these rivers and coastal areas with mudflats and mangroves. In the middle is the rain shadow area, the dry zone of the country. Arakan, the region adjacent to Bangladesh and Tenasserim, the coastal region to the south, have their own characteristic landscape, vegetation and hence bird life.

Only a few areas are open to foreigners. On the whole, they are not allowed to use roads but must restrict themselves to rail or air. My friend from the Netherlands who had organized this trip was hopeful of locating the pinkheaded duck in

## Bird-watching in Myanmar (Burma)

PRAKASH GOLE

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Myanmar. He had studied maps and charts and had selected areas which were likely to have habitat suitable for this species. We were given permission to visit these areas which lay in the north. Therefore, from Yangon (formerly Rangoon) we had to fly north to Myitkyina (pronounced Michina) and were allowed to use roads and waterways (rivers) north and south of this capital city of the north. My observations therefore, are spatially restricted to Yangon and the northern areas.

In my stay of about 3 weeks in these areas, we could record 160 species. We could examine only the fringes of evergreen forests. On these fringes we could observe pairs and small flocks of great and wreathed hornbills respectively, mountain imperial pigeon, two species of bulbul, viz. olive and white-throated and two species of barbet, viz. blue-eared and lined. The green-billed malkoha was seen in a landscape of groves of trees interspersed with cultivation. Red jungle fowl crossed our paths again and again.

Forests opened by cutting, shifting cultivation, roads and tracks and hamlets resembled woodlands and were home to scarlet minivet, quaker babbler, goldfronted leafbird, blue-throated barbet, rufous tree pie, emerald dove and common flameback. Birds of prey such as changeable hawk eagle and black eagle were seen in flight circling over such areas.

We were especially looking at forested wetlands and those overgrown with tall rushes but could not locate many. Typically they were found to be the resting and roosting habitat of ducks, mainly spot duck and cotton pygmy goose.

Hamlets and small villages carved out of forests together with their fields constituted a distinct habitat. Scattered trees, trees standing around houses and along nearby streams together with open fields described this scene. Black drongo, chestnut-tailed starling, jungle and collared mynas in small parties, red-breasted parakeets in small flocks, spotted and oriental turtle doves in ones and twos, an occasional great spotted and bay woodpecker, blackhooded oriole and lesser coucal added colour to this landscape. Trees by the side of cultivation were inhabited by Indian roller, redwhiskered bulbul, tailor bird, rufous tree pie, chestnut-headed bee-eater, black bulbuls and baya weaver birds. Tiny phylloscopus warblers flicked through branches challenging the observer to identify them correctly.

A little outside villages the roadside hedges harboured pied bush chat, blackheaded and long-tailed shrikes, magpie robins, stonechats, pied wagtails and common hoopoe. Vegetable fields and grain cultivation attracted large-sized striped grassbirds, prinias, hill mynas, redvented bulbuls, kiskrels and black drongos perched on overhead cables. Large flocks of oriental turtle doves gleaned grains in recently harvested fields.

Myitkyina sits at the head of a broad, extensive plain where the majestic Irrawaddy comes out of the hills and forms its

broad, fertile, alluvial flood plain. The mighty river with its beautifully clear waters, golden shingle beaches, mudflats and alluvial islands looks extremely impressive and is home to innumerable ducks, geese and waders. Ruddy shelducks outnumbered all others such as mallards, garganey, gadwall and pintails. Gaggles of barheaded and greylag (few) geese could be seen resting on riverine islands. Tall alluvial ridges along the river had colonies of sand martins, a few rocky areas showed plumbeous redstarts and blue rock thrush while trees along the bank concealed chestnut bellied rock thrushes, ashy wood swallow and stork-billed kingfishers.

On the shingle beaches were seen river lapwings, a variety of gulls including brownheaded, blackheaded, mew and heuglin's. Lesser adjutant and black storks singly or in small flocks were also there. On mudflats droves of little pratincole merged beautifully with their surroundings. Pond herons, little egrets and grey herons looked intently for morsels of food. In the river fished Indian and large cormorants as river terns and ospreys hunted for fish overhead. Ferruginous ducks and goosanders, spotbills and redbreasted mergansers swam in the shallows. In deeper waters could be seen a variety of grebes: Great crested, blacknecked and horned. All in all the variety and numbers of all these birds were indeed impressive and reflected the bounteous and unpolluted character of the habitats.

South of Myitkyina lies an extensive flat area devoted entirely to paddy and other crops. In winter most of the fields lay fallow and what a delight they provided us. In early mornings the horizons resounded with clarion calls of common cranes as flock after flock materialised as if from nowhere and descended in drier fields to feed. According to Robson this crane is an uncommon winter visitor to north Myanmar. Our estimate is that 3000 to 5000 common cranes must be wintering in this area. "It was not known till now that such a good population wintered in this area" wrote my Dutch friend, ornithologist J. van der Ven. They were seen to roost on riverine islands in the evening.

Wet fields were found to be occupied by substantial gatherings of barheaded geese and ruddy shelducks. It was known that this goose wintered in Burma especially on the Chindwin and the Irrawaddy. But no estimate was forthcoming. We estimated that about 4000 geese must be wintering in this part along the rivers. The total number of ruddy shelducks soon must be close to 10,000.

Other birds of fallow fields and open areas included chestnut-tailed starling, green bee-eater, Asian pied starling, golden plover, paddyfield pipit and cattle egrets. Black kite, pallid harrier and large-billed crow were the typical birds of prey and carrion eaters of this area. An occasional pied harrier sailed over wet fields.

With plentiful rainfall and free-flowing rivers, one expected Myanmar to be well endowed with wetlands. This indeed is the case in the flood plains of the rivers and their delta regions. But we found that wetlands were under great pressure from fishing, hunting, trapping and agriculture. Typical wetland birds such as egrets and herons, kingfishers and wagtails, sandpipers and sandpipers, moorhens and jacanas, whistling and cotton teals were there but nowhere common or in good numbers. The only bird of unusual interest that we noticed was a white-bellied heron.

Better numbers of birds were observed in wetlands that were protected from over-exploitation, for example, the lakes within the city of Yangon. Darters were observed only on these lakes.

Indeed Yangon with its serene lakes, green parks, well-kept gardens, with its traditional low profile architecture, with its cleanliness, absence of slums and disciplined traffic is a delightful city. It reminded me of Bombay of the sixties. The familiar house crow, common myna and rock pigeons of Indian cities were there too but there were probably more tree sparrows than house sparrows and colonies of blue-tailed bee-eaters, edible nest swiftlets and egrets and herons right in the middle of the capital. This green city nesting under the sublime, golden sheen of the famous Shwe Dagon pagoda makes a lasting impression on your mind as you leave the country.



#### Introduction

The initiators of Haveri 'Parsara Vedike', headed by Mrs. Madhuri Devadhar, Dr. John Devadhar and their daughter Miss Sandra (Dr.) and another ardent birdwatcher from Hubli, Mr. Gurunath Desai and myself from Dharwad, decided to camp this time at least for 3 days in February 2000, on 19th, 20th & 21st at Kyathadevaragudi (K. Gudi) of the famous Biligir Ranganathaswami Hills Wildlife Sanctuary located about 85

## Ornithological Tour of B.R. Hills Wildlife Sanctuary at K. Gudi

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km from Mysore and about 500 km from Haveri Town. Our main intention was to study the bird fauna of B.R. Hills and enjoy wildlife sighting in mountain country, with hill heights ranging between 3000-5000 feet, full of abrupt ups and downs stretching around an area of more than 500 sq. km in Karnataka. It was also our intention to pay a visit to the sacred grove, the 1000 year old 'Doddasampige Mara' revered by the tribals.

The B.R. Hills Sanctuary at K. Gudi is an important ecological region with deciduous, evergreen and grassland vegetation. Among birds the blue-bearded bee-eater, *Nyctyornis athertoni*, fairy blue bird, *Irena puella*, the Malabar parakeet, *Psittacula columboides* are important but, the red-spurfowl, *Galloperdix spadicea*, with a good population has become an inseparable part of the introduced Lantana system. Among large mammals, the Indian bison, *Bos gaurus* and the elephant, *Elephas maximus* are important. Among small mammals, the most common are, the small civet, *Viverricula indica*, the barking deer, *Muntiacus muntjak* and the Indian Chevrotain (Muscde Deer), *Tragulus meminna*, including the flying squirrel, *Petaurus petaurista*. B.R. Hills is one of the best biodiversity hot spots in India and recently the Sanctuary won the 1999 National Award for the Best Eco-Tourism Centre in India.

**Itinerary :** The Tata Sumo carrying us, left Haveri town on the 18th February, early in the morning at 6 o'clock and brought us to a road-side tea-shop near Chitradurga around 8.30 a.m. As we got down there to have a cup of tea, we noticed a group of common birds like koel, myna, coppersmith, golden oriole and bulbul, busy feeding on the fruits of a lone *Ficus religiosa* tree. Why is no attention given to include more fruit and flower bearing tree species along roads that pass through dry zone areas?

The journey continued and we reached the city of Bangalore around 1 p.m. After a little bit of lunch and shopping we drove towards Srinagar Complex and as courtesy would demand we met the C.C.F. Mr. R.M. Ray, who sits in his Offices of the Jungle Lodge there and after confirming our reservations at K. Gudi we continued our journey to Mysore.

On the way, at Mathiken bus-stop, we halted to check up the condition of the age old heronry and to our great surprise the birds had shifted their nests to another adjoining tree because, we were told that they were much disturbed by the honey bees. After reaching Mysore we spent a night in the Kuvempu University campus. On the 19th morning we resumed our journey to K. Gudi and driving along Nilgiris road at 7.30 a.m. on the way at Gajjagalli locality, in a lake thronged with water hyacinth, we saw in the open waters 45 northern shoveler, *Anas clypeata*; 30 members of the Eurasian blackwinged stilt, *Himantopus himantopus*; 2 members of the painted stork, *Mycteria leucocephala*; 2 members of the globally threatened spot-billed pelican, *Pelecanus philippensis* and 4 little grebe, *Tachybaptus ruficollis*. It revealed the extent of distribution of shoveler and stilt during winter in southern peninsula. After crossing Nanjangud Temple and Chamrajnagar Town we saw at Nagavalli lake a group of 30 members of blackwinged stilt again.

Close to Mysore and on either sides of the road up to the foot hills of K. Gudi, agricultural activity was restricted to paddy cultivation and for miles the environment looked lush green. Hundreds of white plumed egrets feeding in marshes and rice fields added beauty to the green background. Around 11.15 a.m. we touched the borders of B.R. Hills Wildlife Sanctuary at Honderbalu check-post where, we were asked to sign the

Register book. The K. Gudi lodges lie just 5 km away from this check-post. The road passes through a dense deciduous forest over a small ghat. In a moment a greyish looking bird flew across and perched on a low branch of a nearby tree. Focussing his binoculars Mr. Desai said it was none other than the common hawk cuckoo, *Hierococcyx varius*, the brain-fever bird, the pee-pee ha calls of which we heard many times during our stay at K. Gudi.

As soon as we entered the campus of K. Gudi Lodge, the waiting chief of the Lodge Mr. Gangaswami received us warmly and took us round to the tents provided there for lodging, and also showed the 'Gul Ghar' where delicious food was served. We were allotted Cottage No. 1 and Log Cabin No. 10. A harsh rattling call which came from a distance alerted us. One of us said it may be that of a racket-tailed drongo, *Dicrurus remifer*, but others thought it was of the rufous tree-pie, *Dendrocitta vagabunda*. The bird flew away and sat on a far off bombax tree full of red flowers. As it left the tree, in mid air, its black-looped silvery grey tail confirmed it as rufous tree-pie. In the dense forest environment it is often difficult to spot birds from their perches. One is forced to rely for identification on the calls it produces. In the tangle of tree branches a few yards away we discovered a group of insect eating birds. Two of them were velvet-fronted nuthatches, *Sitta frontalis*. Their peculiar to and fro, up and down creeping movements on the trunk and the manner in which they exchanged food through their beaks was amazing. With them, in another leafy branch a largish minivet was present. Its rosy underparts and white throat indicated that it was not an ordinary species, and a careful study of its rump and vent revealed its affinity to the rosy minivet, *Pericrocotus roseus*. Grimmett R and others (1998) have stated that this rare bird known to breed in N.E. India & Himalaya, seems to have some non-breeding winter records in the South of Karnataka. The present discovery of the same corroborates their statement. The other two were (1) Verditer flycatcher, *Eumyias thalassina* and (2) the yellow wagtail, *Motacilla flava*. The former was found feeding in the company of goldenfronted leaf-bird, *Chloropsis aurifrons*. The latter was seen on footpaths. Its bounding movements with tail wagging always and especially its foraging methods by tripping among fallen leaves was most attractive. Both of them were winter arrivals in B.R. Hills. We did not come across the forest wagtail. In the moist deciduous forest biotopes of K. Gudi, the loud calls of the two well known and well remembered birds produced almost concomitantly were those of the (1) the brown-headed barbet, *Megalaima zeylanica*. It was easily identified by its characteristic 'kutrac-kutrod' calls or 'kutruk-kutruk' calls. On the other hand the slightly contrasting 'Prucock-Prucock' calls reminded us of the (2) white-cheeked barbet, *Megalaima viridis*. These loud calls seem to keep the jungle awake. We also saw a few members of the crested tree swift, *Hemiprocne coronata* hovering over the branches of a tall dead tree. A lone member of the yellow-crowned woodpecker, *Dendrocopos mahrattensis* was detected by Dr. John Devadhar in the branches of the same tree where two members of the white-bellied drongo, *Dicrurus caerulescens* were hawking for winged insects. We returned at about 2.45 p.m.

At 5.30 p.m. Mr. Gangaswami arranged a trip over the hills and valleys to see wildlife. Mr. Longa was driving the open Jeep. The first encounter was a group of hill mynas, *Gracula religiosa*. On the top of another tree we saw the yellow-footed green pigeon, *Treron phoenicoptera*. As the Jeep went up to a height of nearly 3500 feet the forest vegetation changed. In the clumps of grass growing under trees, a small herd of bison, *Bos gaurus* was seen grazing. Two pairs of grey-jungle fowl, *Gallus sonneratii* had crossed over previously into the lantana hedge followed by a pair of red-spurfowl, *Galloperdix spadicea*. Mr. Longa, the driver pointing down in the valley showed 3 Indian elephants, *Elephas maximus* pushing through tree branches. It was dark now and a barking deer, *Muntiacus muntjak* crossed the road and we could see its body clearly in the powerful headlight of the Jeep.

On Sunday the 20th February, in the afternoon we went to see the 5000 feet high Honnematti hill peak. The 36 kilometer forest road passes through the coffee plantation and at the height of 4000 feet, we saw hamlets and the Birla Temple. The weather was cool and the climate typical of any hill station at that level. The occurrence of a blue bearded bee eater on the way was a good example of habitat specificity (endemism). Thrilling again was the sight of bisons from the peak of Honnematti. A hawk eagle in dark morph, *Spizaetus cirrhatus*? was seen perching. It was pitch dark when we were returning along the same route and we sighted many animals including spotted deer, sambar, barking deer, small civet, blacknaped hare, wildboar and most exciting to watch in the Jeep headlight was a tusk standing by the side of the road. Unperturbed, it stood there more than 3 minutes in full flooded light. Miss Sandra took photographs of it. The same night it drizzled for sometime at K. Gudi and a panther had appeared at a spot near the Log Cabin No. 10 occupied by Devadhars. They switched on their torch and saw it jumping over the fence. This happened around 10.30 p.m. This was disclosed to Mr. Gangaswami in the morning and he said it is harmless. During our stay at K. Gudi everyday in the early morning hours we heard calls of some birds. The most common was the 'kao..kuk; kao..kuk; kao..kuk'; call of the jungle owlet, *Glaucidium radiatum* and the other 'chuk..chuk..chukroo' call was of that of the Indian nightjar, *Caprimulgus asiaticus*. Apart from these two we heard regular calls of the grey junglefowl at intervals on each day. An owl moth found in the same Cabin No. 10, showed its habitat specificity.



We would like to add the following to Dr. Uttangi's article :

**S**cientific research work is going on in B.R. Hills in collaboration with Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE) and Vivekananda Girijana Kalyana Kendra (VGKK). These organisations are situated near the Billigiranganatha temple. It is about 20 kms from K. Gudi.

We went to see the sacred grove 'Doddasampige Mara' on the last day, the 21st February in the afternoon. The location is about 34 km away from K. Gudi quite opposite to Honnematti Peak. The huge tree growth is quaint in design and appears grotesque due to an extravagantly large trunk with a diameter of at least 12 feet. It is rooted 200 steps below in the valley and the tribals consider it sacred and worship it. In this locality there is a luxuriant growth of lantana and it supports members of the pheasant family. We saw many common birds such as large-billed crow, coucal, myna, spotted dove, oriental dove, white eye, thick-billed flowerpecker, redwhiskered bulbul, magpie, koel, hoopoe, small minivet etc.

On our return journey to Haveri on 22nd February, we took the Bennur route and on the way saw a flock of 60 barheaded geese, *Anser indicus*, returning from their feeding grounds around 10.30 in the morning to their roosting tank at Somanathpur. It indicated the trend of distribution of the geese during winter migration right up to the Mysore border. We reached Haveri in the evening at about 6.30 p.m.

**Conclusion :** In any reserved area exploitation will ultimately lead to destruction of biological diversity and if within the area any kind of activity, cultivation, industry, or mining is proposed, it should be outside the conservation area because monocultures like teak, rubber, coffee or tea for commercial use will remove the very constituent part of the eco-system. The environment of B.R. Hill's Wildlife Sanctuary at K. Gudi possesses an exceptionally diversified surrounding compared to any other region in the Western Ghats.

**Acknowledgement :** We thank the C.C.F. Mr. R.M. Ray, D.M. Jungle Lodge, K. Gudi for his kindness in making it possible for us to camp at K. Gudi. We also thank the chief of the staff, Mr. Gangaswami for his hospitality and for the special care taken during trips arranged by him for wildlife sighting. We also thank the driver of the open Jeep, Mr. Longa, for his careful driving on the narrow 5 feet wide forest road, up and down the Ghats.

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## Additional Note

SUMATHI and SRIDHAR  
VGKK, B.R. Hills, Chamrajnagar Dist., Karnataka 571 441

Over 215 species of birds from 44 families have been recorded in the sanctuary. These include 12 endemic species among which yellow-throated bulbul (*Pycnonotus xantholaemus*) and Nilgiri wood pigeon (*Columba elphinstonii*) are endangered. Other endangered species include the rufous bellied hawk eagle (*Hieraetus kinerii*) and Peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*).

In a preliminary survey of butterflies, 116 species from 5 families have been recorded. The largest Indian butterfly, common birdfly (*Troides helena*) occurs in the sanctuary. Three species endemic to south India occur here, i.e., Malabar banded peacock (*Principeps buddha*), Nilgiri tiger (*Danaus nilgiriensis*) and whitedisk hedgeblue (*Lycaenopsis abidisca*).

A preliminary survey of ants at the sanctuary yielded 48 species from 20 genera constituting 8% of the species and 23% of genera recorded in India. The survey also indicated a few unique features of the ant fauna.

Four species of ants not recorded so far in India were recovered.

One genus (*Myrmonoteras ssp.*) originally reported from Tenasserim has now been recorded from the sanctuary, thus adding a new genus to the ant fauna of India.

*Tetramorium inglebyi* described about a century ago on the basis of a single specimen from Travancore was recovered from the sholas of the sanctuary.

Shola forests which constitute only 5-6% of the total forest area of the BRT sanctuary contributed 38% of the ant fauna and had 7 species exclusive to them. Thus shola forests were

found to be unique and rich in their ant composition. Three species otherwise recorded from Burma, Sri Lanka and Southeast Asia were found in the shola forests.

Located at the edge of the Western Ghats, B.R. Hills constitute a live link between the Eastern Ghats and Western Ghats facilitating an active exchange of gene pools between them. Thus the sanctuary serves as an important biological bridge for the biota of the entire Deccan plateau.

Vegetation maps of the sanctuary have been prepared using Geographical Information System (GIS). These are useful in locating the local hotspots of diversity and also in identifying factors governing the biodiversity value of the area.

Community based conservation efforts are being made for sustainable harvesting of Non Timber Forest Products (NTFP) such as honey, amla (gooseberry), lichen, sikkakai, etc. It is done involving the local community of soligas and scientists of ATREE.

#### Reference :

Brochure on 'BRT Wildlife Sanctuary - Natural History, Biodiversity & Conservation' sponsored by ATREE, VGKK.



**E**tawah! The name conjures up visions of a typical North Indian town with potholed roads, water logged streets, no electricity for hours on end and total and complete absence of road sense. You would not be blamed for not wanting to be seen anywhere near there, since the visions are not visions but harsh reality. However, it would come as an interesting piece of news to the birdwatching community that Etawah district (along with adjoining Mainpuri) in UP possibly holds the largest population of sarus cranes, *Grus antigone*, in the world (Choudhury et al 1999).

I, along with my good friend Mr. K.S Gopi Sundar, JRF, Wildlife Institute of India, Dehradun, and Mr. Rajeev Chauhan, Gen. Secy., Society for Conservation of Nature (SCON), Etawah, spent the better part of three days birdwatching in the outskirts of Etawah town and part of Mainpuri district. It was indeed an eye-opener for a budding birdwatcher like myself. I would like to place on record a small list of birds that I was able to identify confidently, which, I may hasten to add, is by no means exhaustive. In fact I had spotted several other species but was unable to identify them accurately enough for me to include them in this list.

Before I proceed on a day by day account of the birding experience, I would like to mention the role of Rajeev in Etawah. Rajeev is currently writing his Ph. D. on turtles and is the main force behind the SCON. He is the founder of this NGO which aims to work on conservation issues in and around Etawah. Gopi is a Junior Research Fellow working on the sarus cranes in India, specifically Etawah and Palia near Dudhwa.

## Birding in Etawah

Capt. JAIDEEP CHANDA

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It was his extensive country wide survey this year along with fellow researcher Jatinder Kaur, which formed the basis of his study of the cranes in and around Etawah. He is also an extremely enthusiastic birdwatcher.

**Day I (8 Dec 99):** We all loaded up on Rajeev's motorcycle and headed outside and sure enough we soon stumbled upon isolated pairs of sarus feeding in the agricultural fields. Moving on we came to what seemed to be the 'Mecca' of sarus cranes. The air was frequently rent with the resonant 'gurn' of the males, some of whom danced away blissfully ignorant of the human population in the near vicinity. The other birds we spotted in large numbers were the woolly-necked stork, painted stork and the white ibis. The sarus in Etawah seemed at one with the villagers and neither seemed to be too perturbed by the presence of the other, this inspite of the fact that the sarus was obviously feeding on a considerable amount of the crop being grown there. The reason for the tolerance of this bird, inspite of its obvious destructive nature was probably that it is a symbol of fertility, since they are known to mate for life. However the real reasons will only emerge after the research being undertaken by the Wildlife Institute of India.

**Day II (10 Dec 99):** We left for the Chambal River on the border of UP and MP on Rajeev's faithful motorcycle and arrived at the spot at around 1030 h. By 1040 h we were on board a motorboat and birding away. Birding is a relatively new hobby to Rajeev as well as to myself and every new sighting had us flipping through the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent (Grimmett et al). Chambal has a traditional reputation for dacoity and

kidnapping, we were informed by our man about town, Rajeev. They have involuntarily performed a good service of keeping the place free from human encroachment, thereby ideal for the conservation of nature. It was a great experience for us to see the Indian skimmer, *Rynchops albicollis*, a relatively rare bird with bright yellow/orange beak with a characteristic lower mandible longer than the upper, with which they skim the surface of the water over which they fly, scooping up their prey. There were eleven skimmers and they gave us a good opportunity to photograph them. That we did not do a great job was entirely our own doing! The disconcerting note however was the sale of sand collected from the river banks of the Chambal. Rajeev tells us that the practice of sand mining from the banks of the Chambal in UP is banned and has been quite effectively implemented. However the ban does not exist on the MP side of the river, hence the degradation of the river bed is going on unabated. The sand is mined in the MP side of the Chambal and brought in tractor trolleys and sold openly in Etawah which is in UP. The need for this practice to be curbed is because these sand banks provide an ideal place for the Indian skimmers and other birds such as the bar headed goose and the spot billed duck to rest. This is also an essential place for a large number of turtles, muggers and gharials to bask in.

**Day III (11 Dec 99):** This being the last day that I would be able to do birding at Etawah, we decided to head for the best known place, Saman Bird Sanctuary in Mainpuri District. This day we were really loaded with equipment: spotting scope, binoculars, cameras, recording equipment etc. And with all this on Rajeev's bike again. This day we were delighted to see some pairs of the relatively rare black necked stork. Saman Bird Sanctuary was filled with waders and ducks. Gopi guessed it to be around 8000 at least. What was disturbing was to see some people fishing on the farther bank, that too by diverting water from the lake.

Some advice for persons going out to Etawah for birding: do not flash around your Swarovski Binoculars, Nikon F 100 or other expensive equipment too much, else they attract the wrong kind of attention. Having a local on these trips is a very useful thing as they understand the do's and don'ts of the place best. Rajeev can be contacted at 575, Karamganj, Panjab Colony, Etawah 206 001 (UP), or at (91)-5688 56602. He would be only too glad to show interested persons around the place.

#### List of the Birds :

**Day I:**

- 1) Sarus crane *Grus antigone*; Woolly-necked stork *Ciconia episcopus*; 3) Black headed ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*;



I found William C. Selover's account of the restoration of Crissy Field, a U.S. Army base as an urban National Park very interesting (NLBW, Vol. 40, No. 1, page 10-11). Armed

- 4) Painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala*; 5) Pallid harrier *Circus macrourus*; 6) Eurasian marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*; 7) Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*; 8) White wagtail *Motacilla alba*; 9) Pied bushchat *Saxicola caprata*; 10) Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*; 11) Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*; 12) Indian robin *Saxicoloides fulicula*; 13) White breasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*; 14) Hoopoe *Upupa epops*; 15) Bank myna *Aridotheres ginginianus*; 16) Red wattled lapwing *Vanellus indicus*; 17) Rock pigeon *Columba livia*; 18) Common myna *Aridotheres tristis*; 19) Long tailed shrike *Lanius schach*; 20) White browed wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*; 21) Sandgrouse (?)

**Day II:**

- 1) River lapwing *Vanellus duvaucelii*; 2) Pied kingfisher *Ceryle rudis*; 3) Black winged stilt *Himantopus himantopus*; 4) Wire tailed swallow *Hirundo smithii*; 5) Marsh sandpiper *Tringa stagnatilis*; 6) Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*; 7) Kentish plover *Charadrius alexandrinus*; 8) Bar headed goose *Anser indicus*; 9) Ruddy shelduck *Tadorna ferruginea*; 10) Indian skimmer *Rynchops albicollis*; 11) Great thick knee *Esacus recurvirostris*; 12) Gray heron *Ardea cinerea*; 13) Black ibis *Pseudibis papillosa*; 14) Spot billed duck *Anas poecilorhynchos*; 15) Oriental honey-buzzard *Pernis ptilorhyncus* (?); 16) Terek sandpiper *Xenus cinereus*; 17) White wagtail *Motacilla alba*; 18) White browed wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*; 19) Rock pigeon *Columba livia*

**Day III:**

- 1) Finn's weaver *Placeus megarhynchus* (?); 2) Bronze winged Jacana *Metopidius indicus*; 3) Asian openbill *Anastomus oscitans*; 4) Brahminy kite *Haliastur indus*; 5) Lesser whistling duck *Dendrocygna javanica*; 6) Purple heron *Ardea purpurea*; 7) Red shank *Tringa totanus*; 8) Eurasian marsh harrier *Circus aeruginosus*; 9) Sarus crane *Grus antigone*; 10) Long tailed shrike *Lanius schach*; 11) Black shouldered kite *Elanus caeruleus*; 12) Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*; 13) Black headed ibis *Threskiornis melanocephalus*; 14) Short-toed snake eagle *Circaetus gallicus*; 15) Painted stork *Mycteria leucocephala*; 16) Black necked stork *Ephippiorhynchus asiaticus*; 17) Egyptian vulture *Neophron percnopterus*; 18) Pied bushchat *Saxicola caprata*; 19) Brown rock-chat *Cercomela fusca*; 20) Common moorhen *Gallinula chloropus*; 21) Common coot *Fulica atra*.

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## A Bird Haven in an Army Cantonment

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forces the world over, through the ages, have denied to the citizens at large, access to their extensive estates out of professional imperatives. No doubt an infringement on civil

liberty but in the long run it creates very favourable conditions for endemic birds, flora and lesser terrestrial life forms to flourish on military estates.

Perhaps the readers of the NLBW would be surprised to know that in India many an Army establishment, Air Force base and Naval station are today the richest biodiversity niches and avifauna havens albeit restricted in extent. Some of them have been in the state of "preservation" for close to 100 years. But the one I now introduce you to is just 30 years old.

In the fading days of the War in December 1971, there was a sudden shift in the strategic perception for Rajasthan Sector. So, vast quantities of materials of war were shifted post-haste to an open fallow area, on the fringes of the desert. There were no trees or any form of ground vegetation anywhere except an odd *Calotropis procera* plant or *Capparis aphylla* bush dotting the barren landscape here and there. Scattered, low sand dunes completed the picture of the typical fringe zone of the arid, desert waste-land. There was no visible evidence of any form of wildlife to a casual visitor.

For reasons of security of the materials dumped, as is the practice with military establishments, the entire area measuring some 980 acres was enclosed by a twin fence of barbed wire twenty feet apart and twelve feet high. A few unpaved tracks were laid out along which materials were stacked under water proof covers. The administrative staff numbering less than twenty were housed under tents. The only masonry construction was for storage of water to combat accidental fire; nearly twenty such fire hydrants were scattered over the area.

Unwittingly, a perfect setting came into being, allowing total and unhindered free-play to forces of Nature. Here was a patch of 980 fallow acres of waste-land but with assured protection against entry of domestic and feral cattle, minimal presence of and disturbance by human beings and a complete ban on the entry of saws, axes, sickles, fire arms and the like.

The Thar desert gets less than 10 mm of rain in the year. But the SW monsoon of 1972 was exceptional. There was liberal showers over many a scattered area of Rajasthan; even a cloud burst occurred over Suratgarh and another about 30 kms north of Suratgarh. By September of 1972, several small patches of grasses surfaced inside this fenced enclosure but I was quite oblivious of what was the beginning of a major ecological change inside the fenced enclosure. At this stage I moved away from the scene.

When I reappeared here in March 1984, Asia's largest and first planned cantonment was in the making and the fenced enclosure was an integral part of it.

At the first opportunity, with a flask of coffee, binoculars and a camera my wife and I set out to drive through the enclosure to spend a few hours in natural solitude. We could not believe what lay before us, the entire surface of what in 1972 was 980 acres of waste-land was now covered by a rich growth of endemic grasses, then stems at this time of the year in flower and rising patches of dense clumps of Sarkanda (*Typha angustifolia*). The other bushes which dotted the grass carpet

were Aak (*Calotropis procera*), Boole (*Aerva tomentosa*), Kaer (*Capparis aphylla*) and Ber (*Zizyphus jujuba*). The Mexican poppy's yellow flowers (*Argemone mexicana*) made a brilliant contrast against the burnished leaves of grasses and the green hue of the sarkanda.

The wonder of wonders was that while I did not spot a single tree there in 1972 now there were hundreds of them; yes, hundreds in just twelve years. The most prominent were the babul (*Acacia arabica*), seesham (*Dalbergia sissoo*), khejdi (*Prosopis cineraria*) and pooloo (*Salvadora persica*). The neem (*Azadirachta indica*), peepul (*Ficus religiosa*), rahida (*Tecomella undulata*) and ber (*Zizyphus Jujuba*) were also in good numbers.

We alighted from the jeep and sat atop what was once a sand dune, now a grass mound. The sun was going down and the space around us was filled by the roosting calls of scores upon scores of grey partridge (*Francolinus pondicerianus*), drowning all other bird call. We were in Eden.

Over the next few months, whatever time and whenever we could find was spent in walking and driving in this enclosure. Mornings and evenings rang out in deafening crescendo of grey partridge calls. Depending upon the time of the year, the black partridge (*Francolinus francolinus*) also joined in with their sharp notes. We could seldom walk a hundred paces without sighting small parties of grey partridges, house sparrow, quail, and occasionally even green bee-eaters dust-bathing on the mud-tracks in sheer joy and then quickly scuttling out of sight, rustling into the tall grass much like snakes. The pea fowl (*Pavo cristatus*) numbered in three digits and the most endearing sight was to come upon a cluster of their brilliant crowns and head, held just above the grass like submarine periscopes. The ber bush when in fruit were literally thronged by the red-vented and the white-cheeked bulbuls, many a rose-ringed parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*) and often by the rufous-backed shrike (*Lanius schach*) and the grey shrike (*Lanius excubitor*).

The behul trees seemed a favourite perch of a large colony of blackwinged kites (*Elanus caeruleus*) while more than 45 barn owls (*Tyto alba*) preferred a cluster of Khejdi trees. The blackwinged kite often entertained us with their dive bombing of the garbils. The house sparrow (*Passer domesticus*) literally concealed the Kaer bushes by their hundreds whereas the green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) seemed to favour the Aak bush. The other most conspicuous birds, particularly in the month of August were the common and striated weaver bird (*Ploceus philippinus & manyar*) nesting on bulbuls and some on the tallest Sarkanda stalks.

This status of the fauna & flora, using the fenced enclosure as a safe haven for roosting, nesting and breeding, had emerged over an unbroken period of just twelve years. There was no conscious effort by man in aiding this resurgence by nature other than keeping the enclosure off limits to cattle, poacher, trapper and shikari purely on the dictate of military security. And I state all this on authority as I was now the principal staff officer of the Army Corps in the area. Not a tree or a blade of grass was planted by human hand. Nature alone had re-asserted itself.

I am conscious that this article is not strictly relevant to the NLBW. But for the long term, overall well-being of Indian avifauna, the readers of the NLBW ought to know about the existence of such niches of biodiversity and avifauna so that their status quo is never jeopardised by political vested interests such as sale of defence lands for enhancement of defence budget. There is a strong case that these patches of green be given the status of mini-sanctuaries etc on much the same lines as is the wilderness on the campus of the National

Defence Academy at Khadakwasla. Of course for implementing any such ideas the professional concerns of the Armed Forces must come first, always and every time not just out of reasons of National Security but because they have been and are the ipso facto guardians of this nature-heritage and they must be retained as willing partners in all such new ventures as well.



## Birds of Ranthambore National Park, Rajasthan

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The following observations were made during a 17-day trip to the Ranthambore National Park in January 2000. The checklist is a welcome byproduct of my visit, which was meant for collecting data for estimating the "Prey-Base (ungulate) Density" at Ranthambore. I was part of a team headed by Mr. Samba Kumar, (Program Officer, WCS) working with Dr. Ullas Karanth (Conservation Scientist, WCS), a well-known field biologist from Karnataka. The data collected by us would supplement the existing information on the tiger density.

**Climate and Topography :** Ranthambore National Park with an area of 392.5 sq.km. is located between 25°54' N-26°12' N latitude and 76°23' E - 76°36' E longitude in the south-eastern part of Sawai Madhopur district, Rajasthan. 274.5 sq.km. of it forms the core zone whereas the remaining 118.0 sq.km. constitutes the buffer. The area was first declared a Wildlife Sanctuary in 1955 and later in 1973 it was awarded the Project Tiger status.

Ranthambore consists of hills extending from SW to NE direction, interspersing plateaus, seasonal streams, nullahs, lakes and tanks. The average elevation of the park is 350 m above MSL (highest point - 540 m and lowest point - 215 m above MSL). The temperature fluctuates between 48° C in summer to as low as 2°C in the winter months. During the rainy season, which extends from July to September, the park receives about 800 mm of rainfall. There are no natural perennial streams inside the park, however several tiny canals constructed over streams and nullahs retain rainwater for major portion of the year. The park authority pumps well-water into certain areas to maintain a year round water supply for its fauna. In addition to this, three large shallow lakes - Padam tal, Milak talao and Rajbagh, contribute immensely towards supporting a diverse flora and fauna. In fact, it is not erroneous to say that the lakes are the life support system of the park.

**Floral Diversity :** Before discussing the avifauna it is important to learn about the various vegetation and habitat types of the area, as bird diversity relates directly to these two factors.

The park has a mixed dry deciduous and thorn forest. The steep hills have very scanty vegetation largely comprising of *Sterculia urens* and *Euphorbia nemifolia*. The gentle slopes on the other hand support luxuriant vegetation. The main stay

of this kind of habitat is *Anogeissus pendula* locally called as "dhok". Other common tree species include *Butea monosperma*, *Cassia fistula*, *Acacia catechu*, *Acacia leucophloea*, *Rosswallia serrata* and *Sterculia urens*. The valleys, with fertile soil and sufficient water courses nurture trees like *Syzygium cumini*, *Bombax ceiba*, *Tamarindus indica*, *Cassia fistula*, *Diospyros melanoxylon*, *Mangifera indica*, *Albizia lebbek*, *Corolla dichotoma*, *Ficus benghalensis*, *Ficus racemosa*, *Flacourzia indica*, *Bauhinia racemosa*, *Holoptelea integrifolia*, *Ehretia aspera*, *Mallotus philippinensis*, *Mitragyna parvifolia*, *Annona squamosa*, *Bridelia retusa* and of course *Anogeissus pendula*. The low-lying areas maintain *Phoenix sylvestris*, *Morinda tomentosa*, *Hygrophila auriculata* amongst various others mentioned above. Whereas *Salvadora oleoides*, *Acacia nilotica*, *Capparis procera*, *Prosopis juliflora*, *Calotropis procera*, *Crotalaria medicaginea*, *Solanum virginianum* etc., line the sandy plains.

Amongst the shrubs that inhabit the park are *Plumbago zeylanica*, *Adhatoda zeylanica*, *Hibiscus micranthus*, *Helicteres isora*, *Crochorus asciuans*, *Barleria prionitis*, *Grewia flavescentia* etc. The frequently encountered climbers are *Cocculus hirsutus*, *Gymnema sylvestre*, *Ichneocarpus frutescens*, *Pergularia daemia* etc. The grasses and herbs also have ample representatives in the area. Some of the commoner ones are *Hibiscus lobatus*, *Tridax procumbens*, *Commelinaceae benghalensis*, *Indoneesiella echinoides*, *Chrozophora rotteieri*, *Cenchrus biflorus*, *Dichanthium annulatum* and *Themeda quadrivalvis* among others. The flora in and around the lakes also plays a significant role in supplying year around food not only for various species of ungulates but also for an assortment of avifauna. Some of the plants growing in the vicinity of the lakes are *Melochia corchorifolia*, *Eclipta alba*, *Coldenia procumbens*, *Heliotropium supinum*, *Ipomea carnea*, *Sutera dissecta*, *Polygonum plebeium*, *Andachne telephoides*, *Cyperus alutatus*, *C. laevigatus*, *C. pangorei*, *C. triceps*, *C. flavidus*, *Rottboellia exaltata*, *Ceratophyllum demersum*, *Typha domingensis*, *Potamogeton crispus*, *Blyxa echnosperma*, *Polygonum barbatum*, *Ipomea aquatica*, *Utricularia stellaris* etc. For more details the reader may refer Das S.V. & Singh V., (1995).

**Some Notes on Avifauna:** It must be borne in mind that the purpose of the visit was to estimate ungulate density and that the birds were observed during line transects devised for counting prey species' of the tiger. Barring some period in the afternoon (between two transects) no extra effort was made to observe birds. Nevertheless, due to an extensive habitat coverage and a consistent period of observation (between 06:30 to 10:30 hr. and between 14:30 to 18:10 hr.), the abundance scale mentioned in Appendix-I is reasonably dependable.

Some of the interesting observations are as follows :

1. While reports of the depleting vulture population are steadily trickling in, the vultures of Ranthambore seem to be holding their ground. Both the long-billed and the white-rumped vultures were seen in large numbers on many instances. Once 54 white-rumped vultures were soon circling overhead, while 47 long-billed vultures were counted near a massive rock phase, presumably their nesting site, as could be guessed from huge white patches on the cliffs. Both the white-rumped and the long-billed species' were observed with chicks. Huge *Ficus sp.* is the favoured nesting trees of the white-rumped vulture.

2. The Eurasian sparrow hawk seems to have specialized in hunting large grey babblers just before nightfall. On four occasions, the hawk was seen flying with a squeaking individual followed by a cacophonous flock of babblers just after sunset.

3. The rufous treepie of the park is extremely bold and feeds from hands of the tourists. It is not an exaggeration to say that they are the crows of Ranthambore.

4. On one occasion, a flock of 21 redvented bulbul along with a male magpie and a male Indian robin were seen feeding on tiny black ants. The feeding frenzy lasted until the ants stopped emerging from their nest situated between rock slabs. The magpie robin was the most dominant of the birds, pecking at any bird that approached its feeding area.

5. Massive flocks of house sparrows consisting not less than 500 individuals were seen in the buffer area of the park on two occasions. The birds were moving in a tight mass from one dhok tree to another with constant chirping. So rapid was their movement that it was difficult to ascertain if they were feeding or just frolicking.

6. Personally, the most fascinating of all was the loud rumbling sound produced by the fast low-flying flocks of the yellow-footed green-pigeon. The sound resembles a 750 cc motorbike racing at top gear.

Due credit must be given to Mr. G.V. Reddy (DFO, Ranthambore National Park) for compiling his bird observations, which stretch over three years, into a respectable checklist (Reddy G.V., 1999). He also plans to design a pocket-sized, easy-to-carry checklist for the field staff. Such a step will definitely go a long way in encouraging the staff to monitor the avifauna of the park. The forests are as good as their

managers and hence, it is pleasing to see that the park is in hands of a passionate man.

**Other Fauna :** I have visited the park on several occasions in the past and as ever, its abounding avifauna thoroughly enthralled me. That Ranthambore is more famous for its tigers and not birds still beats me! The various mammals sighted during the trip include nilgai, sambar, chital, chinkara, wild pig, langur, sloth bear, ratel, common palm civet, porcupine, jungle cat, ruddy and common mongoose, rufoustailed hare, jackal, Indian fox and tiger. There were ample indirect evidences of hyenas but none were spotted during our stay. This could be attributed to their nocturnal habits. A pair of ratel was seen just after sunset by one of our team members. The Indian fox, porcupine and common palm civet were seen in the night during our visits to Sawai Madhopur City. The Indian fox was sighted outside the park boundary, near Sherpur village. On previous visits too, Indian foxes were regularly spotted near human habitations, primarily due to their preference for domestic fowl and rodents.

It is clear from the preceding paragraphs that the park supports an admirable biodiversity. While the wildlife has its own charm, the park's topography on its own has the potential of captivating you for life. Turquoise blue skies, towering yellow mountains, deep ravines, meandering streams, golden meadows, never ending stretches of dhok trees and the ancient fort combine to form one of the most startling landscapes of our country. It is not surprising for a visitor to fathom why people fall in love with the place!

#### Appendix I

AS = Abundance Scale (Number of individuals seen in 17 days)	
A	= Abundant (In excess of 100 individuals)
VC	= Very Common (Between 75-100 individuals)
C	= Common (Between 50-75 individuals)
NC	= Not So Common (Between 25-50 individuals)
NR	= Not So Rare (Between 5-25 individuals)
R	= Rare (Less than 5 individuals)

No.	Species	AS
1	Grey francolin <i>Francolinus pondicerianus</i>	A
2	Jungle bush quail <i>Perdicula asiatica</i>	C
3	Small button quail <i>Tinamix sylvatica</i>	NR
4	Painted spurfowl <i>Galloperdix lunulata</i>	C
5	Indian peafowl <i>Pavo cristatus</i>	A
6	Ruddy shelduck <i>Tadorna ferruginea</i>	R
7	Common duck <i>Sarkidiomis melanotos</i>	NR
8	Cotton pygmy-goose <i>Nettapus coromandeliensis</i>	NC
9	Gadwall <i>Anas strepera</i>	NC
10	Common teal <i>Anas crecca</i>	VC
11	Northern pintail <i>Anas acuta</i>	NC
12	Garganey <i>Anas querquedula</i>	NR
13	Northern shoveller <i>Anas clypeata</i>	NC
14	Common pochard <i>Aythya ferina</i>	R
15	Eurasian wryneck <i>Jynx torquilla</i>	R
16	Brown-capped pygmy woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos nanus</i>	R
17	Yellow-crowned woodpecker <i>Dendrocopos mahrattensis</i>	NR
18	Black-rumped flameback <i>Dinopium benghalense</i>	VC
19	Brown-headed barbet <i>Megalaima zeylonica</i>	NR
20	Coppersmith barbet <i>Megalaima haemacephala</i>	NR
21	Eurasian hoopoe <i>Upupa epops</i>	NR
22	Indian roller <i>Coracias benghalensis</i>	R
23	Common kingfisher <i>Alcedo atthis</i>	NR
24	Storkbilled kingfisher <i>Pelargopsis amauroptera</i>	R

25	White-throated kingfisher <i>Halcyon smyrnensis</i>	NC	97	Black stork <i>Ciconia nigra</i>	NC
26	Pied kingfisher <i>Ceryle rudis</i>	NR	98	Woolly-necked stork <i>Ciconia episcopus</i>	NR
27	Little green bee-eater <i>Merops orientalis</i>	R	99	Bay-backed shrike <i>Lanius vittatus</i>	C
28	Asian koel <i>Eudynamys scolopacea</i>	R	100	Long-tailed shrike <i>Lanius schach</i>	NR
29	Sirkeet ma koha <i>Phasianophaeus lechenaultii</i>	NR	101	Northern shrike <i>Lanius excubitor</i>	R
30	Greater coucal <i>Centropus sinensis</i>	R	102	Rufous treepie <i>Dendrocitta vagabunda</i>	A
31	Alexander parakeet <i>Psittacula eupatria</i>	NR	103	Large-billed crow <i>Corvus macrorhynchos</i>	A
32	Rosenberg's parakeet <i>Psittacula krameri</i>	A	104	Eurasian golden oriole <i>Oriolus oriolus</i>	R
33	Pumice-headed parakeet <i>Psittacula cyanocephala</i>	A	105	Large cuckoo-shrike <i>Coracina maculata</i>	R
34	Asian palm swl. <i>Cypsiurus balasiensis</i>	NR	106	Smaller minivet <i>Pericrocotus cinnamomeus</i>	A
35	Eurasian scops-owl <i>Otus scops</i>	NR	107	Scarlet minivet <i>Pericrocotus flammeus</i>	NC
36	Dusky eagle-owl <i>Bubo coromandus</i>	NR	108	Black drongo <i>Dicrurus adsimilis</i>	NR
37	Brown fish owl <i>Ketupa zeylonensis</i>	R	109	White-bellied drongo <i>Dicrurus caerulescens</i>	NR
38	Scimitar owl <i>Atene brama</i>	NR	110	Asian paradise flycatcher <i>Teresiphone paradisi</i>	NR
39	Grey nightjar <i>Caprimulgus indicus</i>	NR	111	Common iora <i>Aegithina tiphia</i>	NR
40	Indian nightjar <i>Caprimulgus asiaticus</i>	NC	112	Common woodshrike <i>Tephrodornis pondicerianus</i>	NR
41	Rock pigeon <i>Columba livia</i>	C	113	Tickells thrush <i>Turdus tickelliae</i>	R
42	Oriental turtle-dove <i>Streptopelia orientalis</i>	NR	114	Redbreasted flycatcher <i>Ficedula parva</i>	VC
43	Laughing dove <i>Streptopelia senegalensis</i>	VC	115	Tickells blue flycatcher <i>Cyornis tickelliae</i>	NR
44	Spotted dove <i>Streptopelia chinensis</i>	C	116	Grey-headed canary-flycatcher <i>Culicicapa ceylonensis</i>	VC
45	Yellow-footed green-pigeon <i>Treron phoenicoptera</i>	A	117	Oriental magpie-robin <i>Copsychus saularis</i>	C
46	White-breasted waterhen <i>Amaurornis akool</i>	NR	118	Indian robin <i>Saxicoloides fulicata</i>	NC
47	Purple swamphen <i>Porphyrio porphyrio</i>	NR	119	Black redstart <i>Phoenicurus ochruros</i>	C
48	Common moorhen <i>Gallinula chloropus</i>	A	120	Common stonechat <i>Saxicola torquata</i>	NR
49	Common coot <i>Fulica atra</i>	NR	121	Pied bushchat <i>Saxicola caprata</i>	R
50	Painted sandgrouse <i>Pterocles indicus</i>	A	122	Common myna <i>Acridotheres tristis</i>	NR
51	Black-tailed godwit <i>Limosa limosa</i>	NC	123	Bank myna <i>Acridotheres ginginianus</i>	NC
52	Spotted redshank <i>Tringa totanus</i>	NR	124	Spotted creeper <i>Salpornis spilonotus</i>	R
53	Marsh sandpiper <i>Tringa stagnatilis</i>	NR	125	Great tit <i>Parus major</i>	A
54	Green sandpiper <i>Tringa ochropus</i>	NR	126	Dusky crag martin <i>Hirundo concolor</i>	VC
55	Common sandpiper <i>Tringa hypoleucos</i>	NR	127	Wire-tailed swallow <i>Hirundo smithii</i>	NR
56	Pheasant-tailed jacana <i>Hydrophasianus chirurgus</i>	NR	128	Red-rumped swallow <i>Hirundo daurica</i>	NR
57	Bronzewing jacana <i>Metopidius indicus</i>	NR	129	Ram swallow <i>Hirundo rusticus</i>	NC
58	Great thick-knee <i>Burhinus recurvirostris</i>	R	130	Redvented bulbul <i>Pycnonotus cafer</i>	A
59	Black-winged stilt <i>Himantopus himantopus</i>	NR	131	Grey-breasted prinia <i>Prinia hodgsonii</i>	NR
60	Redwattled lapwing <i>Vanellus indicus</i>	C	132	Ashy prinia <i>Prinia socialis</i>	NR
61	River tern <i>Sterna aurantia</i>	NR	133	Plain prinia <i>Prinia inornata</i>	C
62	Black-bellied tern <i>Sterna acuticauda</i>	R	134	Oriental white-eye <i>Zosterops palpebratus</i>	NR
63	Osprey <i>Pandion haliaetus</i>	NR	135	Common tailorbird <i>Orthotomus euryotis</i>	NC
64	Oriental honey buzzard <i>Pernis ptilorhynchus</i>	NR	136	Eurasian chiffchaff <i>Phylloscopus collybita</i>	NR
65	Black shouldered kite <i>Elianus caeruleus</i>	NR	137	Plain leaf warbler <i>Phylloscopus neglectus</i>	NC
66	Black kite <i>Milvus migrans</i>	R	138	Greenish leaf warbler <i>Phylloscopus trochiloides</i>	C
67	Egyptian vulture <i>Necrophorus percnopterus</i>	R	139	Yellow-eyed babbler <i>Chrysomma sinense</i>	C
68	White-rumped vulture <i>Gyps bengalensis</i>	A	140	Large grey babbler <i>Turdoides malcolmi</i>	A
69	Long-billed vulture <i>Gyps indicus</i>	A	141	Lesser whitethroat <i>Sylvia curruca</i>	R
70	Red-headed vulture <i>Sarcogyps calvus</i>	NR	142	Rufous-tailed lark <i>Ammomanes phoenicurus</i>	C
71	Crested serpent eagle <i>Spilornis cheela</i>	NR	143	Crested lark <i>Galerida cristata</i>	NR
72	Eastern marsh harrier <i>Circus assimilis</i>	R	144	Purple sunbird <i>Nectarinia asiatica</i>	NR
73	Shikra <i>Accipiter badius</i>	NR	145	House sparrow <i>Passer domesticus</i>	A
74	Eurasian sparrowhawk <i>Accipiter nisus</i>	NR	146	Chestnut-shouldered petronia <i>Passer xanthopterus</i>	A
75	White-eyed buzzard <i>Buteo buteo</i>	R	147	White wagtail <i>Motacilla alba</i>	R
76	Black Eagle <i>Ictinaetus malayensis</i>	R	148	Willow-wagtail <i>Motacilla flava</i>	NC
77	Greater spotted eagle <i>Aquila clanga</i>	R	149	Citrine wagtail <i>Motacilla citreola</i>	NR
78	Eurasian tawny-eagle <i>Aquila vinogradovi</i>	NR	150	Yellow wagtail <i>Motacilla flava</i>	NR
79	Common kestrel <i>Falco tinnunculus</i>	R	151	Grey wagtail <i>Motacilla cinerea</i>	NC
80	Peregrine falcon <i>Falco peregrinus</i>	R	152	Olive-backed pipit <i>Anthus hodgsoni</i>	NR
81	Little grebe <i>Tachybaptus ruficollis</i>	NC	153	Bay weaver <i>Ploceus philippinus</i>	NR
82	Oriental darter <i>Anhinga melanogaster</i>	C	154	White-throated silverbill <i>Lonchura malabarica</i>	C
83	Little cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax niger</i>	A	155	Scaly-breasted munia <i>Lonchura punctulata</i>	NC
84	Indian cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax fuscicollis</i>	A	156	Rock bunting <i>Emberiza cia</i>	R
85	Great cormorant <i>Phalacrocorax carbo</i>	NC	157	White-capped bunting <i>Emberiza stewarti</i>	NC
86	Little egret <i>Egretta garzetta</i>	NC			
87	Grey heron <i>Ardea cinerea</i>	R			
88	Purple heron <i>Ardea purpurea</i>	NR			
89	Great egret <i>Casmerodius albus</i>	NC			
90	Intermediate egret <i>Mecophya intermedia</i>	NC			
91	Cattle egret <i>Bubulcus ibis</i>	R			
92	Indian pond-heron <i>Ardeola grayii</i>	C			
93	Black-headed ibis <i>Threskiornis aethiopica</i>	NC			
94	Eurasian spoonbill <i>Platalea leucorodia</i>	NR			
95	Great white pelican <i>Pelecanus onocrotalus</i>	NC			
96	Painted stork <i>Mycteria leucocephala</i>	C			



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## CORRESPONDENCE

**KOEL FROG INTERACTION.** Dr. ARUNACHALAM KUMAR, P. O. Box 58, Mangalore 575 001

A small residential fishpond located in my garden at Mangalore, has provided me endless hours of entertainment. Troc pios, magpie robins, jungle mynas, pond herons, kingfishers, coucals, whitebreasted water hens, paradise flycatchers, white headed ground thrush, golden orioles, crows, kites and drongos, all have, at one time or other frequented the shallow tank. On occasions, I have chanced upon a massive rat snake swim with abandon in the clear water. The pond provides me enough observation, on bathing behaviour of many avian species, some odd enough to record as possible write-ups in speciality journals.

A few weeks ago, I was disturbed at about 8 a.m. by a ruckus raised by a koel (*Eudynamys scolopacea*) that had toppled into the waterbody. Flailing wings, the wet bird was unable to lift itself from the tank. I hurried to the pond, and easily recovered the relieved koel: the rescue, however, was not without drama. I found the rather frail bird, unusually heavy and had to use extra effort to clear it from the water level. It was then that I noticed that the bird's left leg had been firmly clamped onto by a huge bull frog, reluctant too, to let go of its avian conquest. Only when I had lifted the koel clear out of the pond did the half kilogram amphibian release the trophy. In fact, the frog made one more attempt, a 'over the surface' launch, to re-secure its hold on the bedraggled bird.

I released the koel after dabbing some salve on its raw leg and drying it. The oddity of the interaction between frog and bird prompts me to report the incident.. and to imagine that "Freddy" the bull frog (christened so by my teenage daughter), who I have saved more than twice from the persistent rat snake's jaws could do this, raised my daughter's hackles, as it did my curiosity. Do birds form menu for frogs? Or is Freddy's choice just a conditioned reflex-response to the koel's aquatic exercise?

as as as

**COUCAL HATCHLING RESCUE.** ARUN BHATIA, 'Dewdrop', 241, 4th Cross, 1st Block, Koramangala, Bangalore 560 034

There are rows of profusely flowering Spathodea on either side of my street with their bright orange blossoms in the quiet residential locality of Koramangala in south Bangalore. Our house, on a 60' x 40' site, has a small garden in front and a tiny backyard where clothes are washed. At 10 a.m. on October 2, 1999, under drying clothes, faint cawing of a bird attracted me. It appeared to have the colours of a common myna and was huddling in a corner, trying to be inconspicuous.

Although the size of a common myna, it turned out to be a mere hatchling, as yet unable to fly. Since a crow pheasant's coop coop coop frequently emanates from a nearby Spathodea and one such bird is sometimes seen foraging in my garden, I surmised that the hatchling was of that species.

The clothes drying area is made theft-proof with netting and has a door. Thinking that the parent would not venture through

such obstruction, I decided to place the hatchling in the front garden in hopes that it would be retrieved. I used a large butterfly net to place the hatchling while it cawed more raucously, partly in defiance and partly out of fear. I covered the net with a piece of gunny sac and carried it out front.

When I rested it on the parapet wall, net, sac and all, it was quiet and unmoving so I removed the gunny sac in order that the parent would clearly see it. The hatchling soon leaped out, took a five foot lunge, clumsily using wings, flopped on to the mud and then cowered in a corner behind anthuriums. I was fearful of the crows, feral cats and the family of a dozen monkeys that roam in our locality and so remained a few feet away, guarding the chick.

For half an hour, there was no sign of the parent. Perhaps my presence is a deterrent, I thought, and I moved away. Half an hour later, there was no hatchling in its corner or anywhere else in the garden. But faint caws, similar to what it had made earlier, were heard from the general location of the crow pheasant's Spathodea branch. I was reassured, although the caws could have been from another hatchling. I do not know for sure.

Crow pheasants' nests are generally in thorny shrubs at moderate height. I have not been able to actually see my neighbour bird's nest, but the activity and coop coop coop sound is obvious in that nearby Spathodea at about 20' height. Similar activity/sound at 15-20' height in Bauhinias and other trees is indicated along the 4 kilometer walking I do from my house each morning parallel to Sarjapur road.

as as as

**SIGHTING OF GREY HORNBILL AT BANSWARA OF RAJASTHAN.** H.V. BHATIA, 434, Dadabari Extn., Kota 324 009

I am a retired Forest Officer. During my service period I came in contact with Dr. Salim Ali at Bharatpur where I served for 4 years. Contact with wildlife and birds is a regular part of the job. Banswara a southern district of Rajasthan is inhabited by tribals and when I was posted there in 1961 absence of wildlife including birds was glaring, inspite of good forest cover at that time. The reason was the way of life of tribals, children with smaller bows and arrows practised on denizens and everything was good for the pot. However, after retiring in 1989 I was assigned an evaluation work of Agricultural Soil Conservation work of watershed in Banswara district and was staying at Circuit House on 20th April 2000. At 6 a.m. I was loitering on approach road and was attracted by a peculiar flight of bird and was surprised by sighting 4 grey hornbill and at an interval of one and half minute, another 2 and then again 2 grey hornbill followed. It was a pleasant surprise and on coming back to Kota where I reside, I wrote to Asad R. Rahmani about the event.

Banswara Circuit House is situated at the foot of a small hillock and near by, there is a lotus pond and Hanuman temple with a few large trees.

as as as

**NESTING OF RED-WHISKERED BULBULS (*PYCNONOTUS JOCOSUS*). NILANJAN BANERJEE, Amia Uttarpara, P.O. Amia, Dist. Howrah, West Bengal 711 401**

July is the breeding season for birds and on a cloudy morning on the 3rd July 1997 I saw a pair of red-whiskered bulbuls chirping merrily and quite loudly while sitting on the clothes line in our house. There was plenty of rubbish lying around, coconut leaves, wood chips etc. Around 7.30 a.m. I saw the birds commence nest making on the top of a bundle of coconut leaves on the floor. The top of the bundle was 42" from the floor.

On subsequent days the birds were active, bringing nesting material every 3 minutes or so. But curiously I never found them both with nesting material at the same time. On 7th July at 7.50 a.m., the completed nest looked like a roundish cup and seemed to be ready for occupation. I kept a careful watch on the proceedings and this is what I recorded :

On 8th July early morning, female occupied the nest. It flew in and out of the nest many times and never stayed too long. During the morning I found a pink-white egg blotched with various shades of red.

On 9th July at 5.30 a.m. I saw the second egg, and from 7 a.m. the bird started to incubate. The bird stayed in the nest at night.

On 10th July I saw the bird come to the nest at 7 a.m. At 7.45 a.m. when she left the nest I found the 3rd and the last egg.

The eggs were getting redder and glossier day after day. On 21st July the first egg hatched at about 6.30 a.m., and there was a tiny pink blob in the nest. The second egg hatched about 4 p.m. the same day.

The last egg did not hatch even on the 23rd, and on the 24th, the third egg had disappeared. No egg-shells were found inside the nest or around.

The young were sightless when born, but their eyes opened prominently on the 26th, and they seemed to watch the world around them largely. Both parents fed them from time to time. I think the female guarded the nest at night from the 9th to the 27th July.

I had marked the eggs with ink for identification and I discovered that the first egg hatched after 13 days, and the next in 12½ days.

os os os

**GOLDEN ORIOLE ON THE GROUND. ZAIBIN A.P., Ambalaparambil House, P.O. Irumbuzhi 676 513, Malappuram Dist., Kerala.**

Recently I bought Salim Ali's Indian Hill Birds (Eighth Edition 1990) and found on page No. 102 that golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*) is entirely arboreal and never seen on ground.

But when I traced my field notes on this species found written as follows :

4 December 1999

Around 11'o clock a solitary female golden oriole seen on a small mango tree scanning the leaves. Then it hopped to lower branches and made a harsh call. Soon it flew to clear ground

(open front yard) and sat near 'ant holes' picking immediately a centipede ('Kalkunchari' in malayalam) and returned to lower perch.

It stayed on the ground for about 7-10 seconds. Oriole struck the prey on the branch, then swallowed and sat on the same perch for some time.

Is it possible, many birds which are believed to be strictly arboreal, would descend on ground when they find a favourite meal?...

os os os

**FORAGING & FEEDING THE FLEDGLING OF THE BLUE-BEARDED BEE-EATER. SH.T. NIRMALA, Anaikeyy P.O., Coimbatore 641 108.**

A family of blue-bearded bee-eaters (*Nictyornis athertonii*) consisting of two adults and two young birds appeared on 22nd May 1999 in the mixed dry deciduous habitat of Anaikeyy Reserve Forest, Coimbatore (76° 47' E and 11° 5' N). This area is contiguous with moist deciduous forest with elevation of about 700 meters. This species is a rare siting in this area. It is recorded as resident and locally moving (Ali and Ripley) and breeding in Western Ghats.

The parent birds sallied from a perch of 10 m height of Albizia sp. calling their young ones with chortle. By hearing this call the fledglings with short tail went behind, approached and stood on either side of the parent which brought the food, begging to receive the food. But the parent fed only one among them. Second time it fed the second fledgling which didn't receive the food first time. After receiving the food one of the fledglings sallied and attempted to catch a prey but didn't succeed. The other fledgling was too busy relishing the food given by its parent and also too lazy for attempting to catch a prey. At every 5 minutes interval each one of the fledglings was receiving food. Parent birds took approximately 5 minutes for bringing food. The food items brought by the parents varied from beetles to caterpillars. This "family show" started at 0915 a.m. and came to an end by 1030 a.m.

Ref : Ali, S and Ripley, S.D. (1987); Compact Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan. Second Edition; Oxford Univ. Press, New Delhi.

os os os

**INDIAN SKIMMERS *Rynchops albicollis* in RAJASTHAN - FURTHER RECORDS. K.S. Gopi Sundar, Wildlife Institute of India, P.B. 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun 248 001**

It is amazing how little is known about this beautiful bird. I was on one island in the Chambal river on which there were more than 100 individuals of the species and located c. 25 nests. Quite incredible to watch them skimming around, belly wetting and feeding the young.

Recently, two publications in newsletter have recorded the Indian Skimmer from non-fluvial habitats in Rajasthan (Sangha & Kulshreshtha 1998, Kaur 1999). Here is another addition to the data set.

During a survey to locate Sarus Crane nests around Bharatpur, I visited Ban Bareta Lake (N 27° 10', E 77° 31') on 6th June,

2000. The large lake was drying up in the summer heat which had given rise to islands within. On two of the smaller islands, there were three pairs of skimmers. When sighted first, they were all asleep with their bills tucked into their wings. During the observation (1110 - 1140 h), they woke up displaying bright orange bills. Two birds remained crouched in two different small depressions for the entire period of observation and it appeared as if they were incubating eggs. The other four birds walked up to the water's edge and, of these, one indulged in belly-wetting which is useful both to cool the bird and to cool eggs and young. All six birds were jet-glossy-black on the upper side contrasting sharply with the white on the lower parts. The plumage, crouching and belly-wetting all indicate breeding of the birds in the area or nearby. Unfortunately, a visit to the islands to confirm the breeding was not possible owing to an absence of boats in the area and a personal inability to swim.

This observation adds to the view expressed previously that Rajasthan is an important state for the globally endangered Indian Skimmer and that the southern parts may indeed house more numbers of the birds.

Out of the total 16 birds seen by Sangha & Kulshreshtha (1998), 10 were seen in the pre-monsoon period and Kaur's sightings (1999) were in July, and this observation was in June before the rains. Another candidate for the summer counts supported by N. Shiva Kumar (2000)?

Thanks are due to B.C. Chouchury and Jatinder Kaur (Wildlife Institute of India), Nalini Choudhury and Bachchu Singh (Keoladeo-Ghana National Park) for their company during the survey.

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Shiva Kumar, N. (2000). Black-necked Storks, Sarus Cranes and Drongo chicks. NLBW 40(1) : 12.

or or or

**STATUS OF THE IMPORTANT BIRD AREAS (IBA) PROGRAMME.** SUPRIYA JHUNJHUNWALA, IBA Officer, Ornithology, Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, Dr. Salim Ali Chowk, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai - 400 023.

Many bird habitats in India and bird species that depend on them have become severely threatened. The Indian IBA project

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will identify document and protect a network of sites which cover all of these habitats and species particularly those which are under the greatest threat.

A significant proportion of bird and other animal and plant species can be effectively conserved by protection of key sites, either as officially protected areas (national parks and reserves) or through the promotion of sustainable land use practices. The IBA program aims to identify and promote the protection of networks of such key sites.

The Important Bird Areas Programme India has completed its series of regional workshops to identify potential IBAs in India. In India Bombay Natural History Society, the BirdLife partner designate coordinates the IBA programme nationally.

The workshops helped in bringing together ornithologists, forest officials, birdwatchers, research scholars and people interested in conservation. All the participants of the workshops worked together to identify areas that were important for the long term conservation of wild birds. During the last year a vast network of Ornithologists, birdwatchers and conservation experts have been involved in the IBA data collection. The workshops have involved substantial collaboration with governmental and non-governmental organizations.

Almost a thousand sites were identified as potential IBAs during the workshops, based on a set of globally standard criteria developed by BirdLife International. IBAs will be identified from amongst this list to try and ensure that all the habitats essential for the long term survival of Red Data Book species for whose conservation India is important are conserved. Data on the IBAs are useful for conservationists, ornithologists, Governmental and Non-governmental agencies, policy makers, researchers, consultant and planners. The Data is intended to guide practical management and actions at IBAs and have become increasingly recognised as an extremely valuable currency for site conservation.

This programme has also been instrumental in getting the individuals and organisations involved in the conservation movement of India to work together.

Contact us at the following address : IBA Team, Bombay Natural History Society, Hornbill House, Shaheed Bhagat Singh Road, Mumbai 400 023, Tel. : (91) (22) 282 181 Fax : (91) (22) 283 7615/ 202 5481/82

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Cover : Mottled wood owl (*Strix ocellata*). This chunky owl is mottled, barred and streaked with brownish-black and white, with occasional tawny coloured patches. The mottled wood owl frequents lightly wooded plains and is partial to mango groves, ancient tamarind, banyans and other trees with dense foliage. It has a loud eerie, quivering call 'chuhua chuhua' - uttered half a dozen times while emerging from its day time retreat and again as the bird retires at dawn. The mottled wood owl has an exclusive appetite for rodents and therefore immensely beneficial to agriculture.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

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## Editorial

### Twice Told

In the Editorial of the last Newsletter I referred to a suggestion by Brig. R. Lokaranjan to reprint some of the more striking articles of the past, and I reprint D.A. Stairmand's article of February 1972 in this issue. The response to Stairmand's idea by R.E. Hawkins, R.S. Dharamkumarsinhji and K.K. Neelakantan will follow in later issues. Perhaps some of you may like to play this game and send the result to the Newsletter.

### Describing Colours

One of the problems of a birdwatcher is describing colours, and as far as possible we should standardise on the terms we use. Not an easy task, but in the *Birds of the Indian*

Subcontinent, Grimmett, Inskip & Inskip make useful suggestions. I quote from the initial chapter : How to use this book.

"We have attempted to be consistent in the use of terms for plumage colours although we have aimed to keep these simple by confining ourselves largely to those which are currently in widespread use. An attempt to use a more discriminative and comprehensive nomenclature (Smith 1975) was quickly abandoned, since colours in the natural world are infinitely more complex than are covered by Smith's useful guide; moreover such terms can be used only if readers are familiar with the swatches (i.e. a collection of samples) of colour and if artists have been able to follow them. Certain terms have been used "frequently, and merit some explanation: cream is the colour of milk cream; buff is a deeper colour than cream, a dull brownish yellow, with fulvous being deeper and stronger still; chestnut is reddish-brown (brownier than rufous) and the colour of the fruit of a horse chestnut tree *Aesculus*; olive is the colour of a green olive; rufous is dull red tinged with brown; and vinaceous is the colour of red wine." As the authors say, the use of the word 'pale' and 'dark' before these terms will add more precision. Finally, "in compound colours the dominant colour is placed last: thus bluish grey is greyer than greyish blue". Let us attempt to follow this pattern.

### Globally Threatened Species Programme

In the Editorial of the July/August 2000 issue I made an appeal for funds to enable us to sponsor a bird for this project. Mr. K.A. Bhoja Shetty, Ex-C.C.F. Tamil Nadu (Now at B1-B2, South City, L & T Apts. Tel : 6584438) has offered Rs. 1,000, and there is another offer from K.S. Gopi Sundar, from the Wildlife Institute of India, Dehra Dun, of Rs. 1,500, and Gopi Sundar is attempting to get further funds from friends. Aseem Tripathi has sent Rs. 100. Bob & Tanya Stewart of Vattakanal Shola Tree Nursery, P.O. Box 109, Kodaikanal 624 101, have promised Rs. 5,000/-, Ashok Kumar of Wild Life Society of India, Delhi has offered Rs. 1,000/- So we are getting on and I hope the figure of Rs. 16,000/- is not beyond reach.

### Offer of \$ 500 by William C. Selover

Bill Selover, whose article appeared in the Jan/Feb 2000 issue under the title "Birdwatching from Lalpuri Reservoir to Crissy Field", has offered to reit \$ 500 (about Rs. 25,000/- at today's exchange rate) to the Editor for any suitable conservation project. I wrote to Bill that I will request him to send the amount only after I was sure that the money can be used for producing good results on the ground. So if you have any ideas, please let me know. I do not want the money to go into research or further studies. We all know what needs to be done. The problem is to achieve effective results on the ground. Maybe some of you are in close touch with a wetland which can be protected by the planting of trees around it; by opening up the in-flow of rain water; or blocking a sewage line. So little needs to be done to regenerate our land with the beneficent sun in the sky proffering its energy. Do apply your minds to this little problem and then we can make use of Bill's offer.

### **Salim Ali International Award for Nature Conservation**

The second Salim Ali International Award was conferred on Mr. Peter Jackson by the Bombay Natural History Society in Bombay on the 14th of September. Luckily I was invited to chair the meeting and so had the good fortune to listen to Peter's erudite lecture on the status of cat family in India. But Peter has also done a great deal for our bird life, and a para from the Citation reads as follows :

"Mr Peter Jackson has devoted a great part of his life to the cause of conserving the wildlife and natural resources of India. He spearheaded the conservation of endangered wild cats, especially the tiger, and other endangered species like Asian elephants and rhinoceros through the IUCN's Species Survival Commission, and through research and publications. Through his contacts with the late Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi, Mr. Peter Jackson was instrumental in establishing Sultanpur Bird Sanctuary near Delhi, and the Porbandar Flamingo Sanctuary in Gujarat. Mr. Peter Jackson was also a close associate of the late Dr. Salim Ali." Readers will recall Peter's fascinating piece on the pheasant-tailed jacana in our 40th anniversary number of November-December 1999.

After the meeting in Mumbai, Peter went to Delhi and this is what he wrote to me after reaching home :

"My visit to Delhi proved to be very exciting. I stayed with Ranjitsinh and said I would like to visit "my" sanctuary at Sultanpur. Ranjit said there had been no water, and therefore no birds for several years. It seemed ironic that the sanctuary should be dying just when I received an award that cited my role in establishing it. Nevertheless, we decided to go. The Director received me and said that the previous day an agreement had been reached to provide the jheel with five cusecs of canal water for 60 days a year, and that the water had started to flow while I was there - to prepare the place for a visit by the Chief Minister! This means a water supply similar to that provided by monsoons, and release will follow the pattern. There were actually ponds with a good number of waterfowl, and a nesting colony of storks, spoonbills etc. has been established on trees planted in recent years. So, provided the water authorities keep their promise, Sultanpur has a bright future".



Rishi Valley Education Centre

Since the publication of the article on Vedanthangal birds in the Newsletter (Santharam & Menon, 1991), which had some details of waterbird populations in the bird sanctuary between 1981 and 1991, I came across some interesting information which I thought would be worthwhile sharing with our readers. This includes references to the sanctuary in "The nest and eggs of Indian Birds" by Allan O.Hume and edited by Eugene William Oates (Vol.III) published in 1890

### **J.S. Serrao**

I have just heard about the death of J.S. Serrao who was for many years the Senior Stenographer of the BNHS. When Salim Ali decided to embark on his 10 Volume Handbook, he was desperately seeking an assistant to help him with the task. After some fruitless efforts in the open market, Salim requested the Executive Committee of the BNHS to lend him Serrao which they did. Salim told me once that without Serrao the Handbook may not have seen the light of the day. It was only Serrao's dedication, and his phenomenal memory which made it possible for all the details to be put in place. When the 10th Volume was complete Salim presented Serrao with a cheque of a thousand rupees, and for Serrao it was not the amount but the appreciation behind the gift that was so valuable.

It is said that no man is a hero to his valet, but Salim was certainly a hero to Serrao. And, as I have acknowledged before Serrao was of invaluable help to the Newsletter in its early years. He saved the Editor from many a slip, and his meticulous cyclostyling made the Newsletter a presentable item. I see from a recent note sent by Aasheesh Pittie that Serrao had contributed as many as 54 notes to the Newsletter between 1982 till 1996. All very worthwhile.

### **The Peter Jackson Prize**

Entries are invited for the above prize which carries a citation and a cheque of Rs. 1000/- Eligible to everyone who can trust himself to tell the truth & suppress the desire to win by the slightest falsehood.

Participants must inform the Editor of their intention to participate before 31.12.2000.

The prizes will be given to the individual who can claim to have seen and records on the spot the largest number of bird species seen between the hours of 6 a.m. to 6 p.m. (6-18 hours) on any single day of his choice between 1.1.2001 to 28.2.2001. In the case of birds whose presence is unusual, or of warbles & birds of prey where identification is difficult, relevant notes must be provided (with reference to BOI bird & BIS or others) for confirmation.

The editor will appoint a judge whose decision will be final and the prize will be given before 31.03.2001.



## **More on Vedanthangal Birds**

V. SANTHARAM

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(2nd Edition); accounts by R.S.P. Bates based on his visits in 1926 and between 1928-30 published originally in J.B.N.H.S and subsequently compiled in his book "Birdlife in India" (1931); an article titled "Vedanthangal" by D.A. Stairmand, published in Newsletter July 1971 issue.

The account of Vedanthangal in Hume's book (Pg. 238-239) is by an anonymous writer and gives a good description of

the sanctuary and nesting cycle of the waterbirds. He says, "From the north-east to the centre of the bed of the tank there are some five to six hundred trees of the *Barringtonia racemosa*, from about ten to fifteen feet in height, with circular, regular, moderate-sized crowns, and when the tank fills, which it does during the monsoons, the tops only of the trees are just visible above the level of the water". There is no estimate of the population size of breeding birds: "... immense number of waterowl - herons, shell-ibises, water-crows or cormorants, darters and paddy-birds and c., make it their rendezvous on these occasions".... "The nests lie side by side touching each other, those of the different species arranged in groups of five or six, or even as many as ten or twenty on each tree".

When Bates visited Vedanthangal in November 1926, he found there were 5-600 of the *Barringtonia* trees. But the entire tank was dry due to the failure of the monsoon and no nesting took place. In 1928, he again visited the place in November. He says of the total number of birds ...." a crowd whose number I found it an impossibility to gauge, though after further visits, I estimated it at being not less than five thousand birds. One of my friends insisted on thirty thousand as his estimate, so I certainly think that my computation can be taken as in no way as exaggeration". Regarding the composition of the species, he says : "Roughly .... only about a third of the trees were occupied, probably 150 in all, those in the shallower water being void of birds. Night herons and cormorants formed easily three-quarters of the population with spoonbills not a bad third. On nearly the same date the following year I found practically no difference."

I present below a summary of Bates' estimate of the individual species for the period 1928-1930:

Large cormorant - 2 pairs

Little cormorant - No numbers given. But he says- "I really believe that in this heronry to find an occupied tree without some cormorants' nest in it would be impossibility."

(Bates had not recorded the Indian shag. However his photographs clearly show Indian shags which are labelled as 'Little cormorants'. So both species were present at Vedanthangal).

Darter - "I doubt if there were more than half a dozen pairs".

White ibis - 10 pairs in 1928-29; 60-70 in 1929-30.

Spoonbill - A few colonies of considerable strength. Estimate: 300-400 pairs.

Openbill stork - 1928-29: Confined to less than half a dozen trees (No figures given). 1929-30 - 200.

Grey heron - (No figures given)

Little egret - "No more than a dozen were breeding in early March 1929 and on February 16th, 1930, I saw only two pairs, one of which was building while the other was still laying." Bates also mentions that great number of birds were seen around the tank and that they were not breeding there, but were merely using the trees as resting places.

Night heron - "In 1929-30 the night herons were in excessively large numbers and easily outnumbered the cormorants when I visited the tank on December 29th and February 16th."

The article by Stairmand was more recent (1971) and consists of extracts of his letter to Prof. K.K. Neelakantan and the latter's reply.

Mr. Stairmand had visited Vedanthangal on 11th January 1971 and was disappointed at the state of the famous heronry. In contrast to Juan Spillet's observations in the JBNHS (Vol. 65:633-663; 1968) that the canopy of a grove of 500 *Barringtonia* trees occupied about half the area of the tank (on which the birds nested) he could count only about 70 trees which occupied about one-tenth of the area of the tank. On enquiry he was told by some government employees that there were 117 *Barringtonias* in the tank and that the rest had all died of old age in the last 2-3 years which to Mr. Stairmand sounded incredible. He brushed aside their figure of over 10,000 birds on the tank as pure fantasy and he thought there were just about 1,000 birds. He saw few cormorants and no pelicans or storks other than openbills.

In his reply, Prof. Neelakantan wrote of his visit to Vedanthangal just six days after Mr. Stairmand's trip. He too expressed shock at the sight of the scattered, diseased-looking trees. He however, felt that the figure of 1,000 birds was too low an estimate though he himself had made no count. But he noted 11 breeding species - white ibis, little cormorants, a few shag, darter (about 50?), openbill stork, cattle egret, 2 other egrets (little and median?), spoonbill, grey heron and night heron.

Prof. Neelakantan also expressed grave concern over the precarious survival of the *Barringtonia* trees. He noted that there were two important changes at Vedanthangal since its promotion as an official sanctuary "the phosphate-rich water is no longer released into the neighbouring fields, and the traditional practice of removing silt from the tank bed annually (after the birds have left) has been stopped. Could these, I wonder, be the reasons for the decay of the trees?" He also noted that there was no natural regeneration of *Barringtonia* and attempts to plant did not succeed as the saplings did not survive the first flooding.

In concluding the note, Mr. Stairmand echoed the views of Prof. Neelakantan. He also agreed that his "estimate of 1000 birds nesting was a little too low but I would stress one point clearly - many birds that had gone to Vedanthangal to nest were not nesting when I saw them. They simply had not got the space." He also felt it may take many years to restore Vedanthangal to its former glory.

Well, the sequel to the story is that by the late 70's, the Forest Department planted several *Acacia nilotica* trees and according to their estimate, there were 5000 *Acacia* and almost 1000 *Barringtonia* trees (Paulraj 1981). Our estimates of the birds from 1981-1991 have shown that the bird populations have remained at 5-6000 birds, the figure estimated by M. Krishnan (1981) and Spillet (1968) and that the additional trees did not dramatically increase the nesting bird populations. It was noted that the newly planted *Acacia* trees were only occasionally used as nest-sites, though a few species used twigs from these trees for building nests (Santharam and Menon 1981).

Between 1991 and 1996, I had fewer occasions to visit Vedanthangal and so I had no chance of counting the birds. A brief visit was made in 1996 (14-15 February). A rough estimate revealed the presence of around 5000 birds.

A proper count was made on 2nd March 1997 and this revealed an increase in the numbers of the nesting birds to over 12,500 birds. I give below the figures with the maximum figures for 1981-91 period for comparison.

Species	1997	Maximum (1981-91)
Spottedbilled pelicans	249	-
Cormorants (little, shag)	3612	2831
Darter	12	-
Grey heron	302	365
Egrets (little, median, large and cattle)	4668	2456
Night heron	791	-
Spoonbill	68	120
White Ibis	1093	482
Glossy Ibis	127	-
Openbill stork	1202	604
Painted stork	183	100
TOTAL	12505	-

(Note : During the period, 1981-91, spottedbilled pelicans were present in small numbers but had not figured in our counts. Darters too were not counted but their numbers have always been low. Night herons were not counted earlier because of their remaining inside the foliage during daytime. Glossy ibis are new additions to the sanctuary.)

Comparing the recent figures with those of the late 1920's, we find certain species have managed to maintain their populations steady: (if not increased in numbers) -

cormorants (little and Indian shag?), grey heron(?), night heron and darter could be some of them. Openbill stork and white ibis have shown increase in their numbers. Spoonbill appears to be adversely affected from 300-400 pairs, it is down to 60-120 individuals. Only a fraction of the egrets present appear to be breeding and the notes of Bates indicate that this has been so even in the 1920's.

In the recent times, there has been an 'invasion' by some new species and they have settled down to breed in the sanctuary.

They include spottedbilled pelican (nesting since 1984), painted stork (since 1986) and the glossy ibis. The last mentioned species has been seen in the last 5-6 years in good numbers and there are reports of it breeding in the sanctuary, though I have not seen it myself at nest.

Regular monitoring of the bird populations of Vedanthangal needs to be carried out to understand their dynamics and could yield useful insights to manage this ancient heronry in the years to come.

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## Waterfowl of the Carambolim Lake

HEINZ LAINER

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During last year's Asian Waterfowl Count, while I was glued to the ocular of my field-scope trying to sort through thousands of wintering ducks out on the Carambolim lake, I heard some cars drive up behind me. A babble of, mostly, English voices and some commotion ensued. When I was able to lock up from my task, I found myself surrounded by 16 British and Scandinavian birdwatchers clustered around 11 tripod-mounted field-scopes, trying to notch up a few more "first sightings" for their life-lists - an almost everyday occurrence between November and March. Goa, along with such far-flung countries as Gambia in West Africa and Puerto Rico in Central America, has become a Mecca for birdwatchers from the West. And in Goa, one of the main attractions is the Carambolim lake.

This shallow freshwater irrigation tank of c.0.7 sq.km, situated close to the World Heritage site of Old Goa, Ilhas tal., North Goa distr., sustains, throughout the year, a fairly large and varied population of resident waterfowl and, in winter, an often immense number of migratory ducks.

The main resident and wintering duck species are:

Lesser whistling teal *Dendrocygna javanica*: A winter visitor in rapidly increasing numbers (from 200+ in Jan.89 to 8-10000 in March 2000). Only a handful of birds oversummers;

breeding was recorded only once (Oct.96).

Pintail *Anas acuta*: A regular winter visitor with maximum numbers, in Jan.- Feb., averaging close to 35000 over a period of 6 years. In January 88, more than 70000 birds were estimated to be present for a couple of weeks, the largest number for any wetland covered under the annual Asian Waterfowl Count (AWC) for this year. The drought conditions prevailing in northern India had apparently forced the pintails further south into the peninsula, where wetlands were filled by a sufficient monsoon.

Garganey *Anas querquedula*: An average of 3-4000 birds winters regularly, a maximum of 8000+ was counted in Jan.91.

Cotton teal *Nettapus coromandelianus*: A winter visitor numbering up to 800+ (Jan.99) and resident in very small numbers.

The following ducks are more or less irregular winter visitors:

Common teal *Anas crecca*: up to 200.

Spotbill duck *A. poecilorhyncha*: only 4 records of up to 12 birds. Mallard *A. platyrhynchos*: 3 sightings of up to 15 birds.

Gadwall *A. strepera*: 3 records of up to 5 birds.

Wigeon *A. penelope*: up to 5 birds in 4 sightings.

Shoveller *A. clypeata*: almost regularly up to 10 birds.

Common pochard *Aythya ferina*: single sighting of 6.

White-eyed pochard *Aythya nyroca*: up to 3 seen on 5 occasions.

Comb duck *Sarkidiomis melanotos*: near regular, up to 50 birds; numbers are declining steadily.

Other waterfowl, either resident or more or less regular visitors, include:

Indian reef heron *Egretta gularis*; openbill stork *Anastomus oscitans* (up to 25);

White-necked stork *Ciconia episcopus* (up to 55); lesser adjutant *Leptoptilos javanicus* (occasional singles); white ibis *Threskiornis aethiopica* (up to 14); glossy ibis *Plegadis falcinellus* (up to 44); spoonbill *Platalea leucorodia* (up to 9); watercock *Gallinula chloropus* (two sightings of 2 and 5); moorhen *Gallinula chloropus* (up to 1000+ winter visitors); purple moorhen *P. porphyrio* (residents, including a few breeders, number c.200, winter visitors up to 500); coot *Fulica atra* (up to 2000+ winter visitors); pheasant-tailed jacana *Hydrophasianus chirurgus* (resident and wintering birds number up to 600; sparse breeder); bronze-winged jacana *Metopidius indicus* (breeding resident, but mainly winter visitor in numbers up to 200).

The AWCs of the last 15 years have shown that the Carambolim lake is a major wintering quarter of migratory

ducks in the whole of the Indian peninsula and one of the most important of the subcontinent. Under the Ramsar Convention, which India signed in 1982, this humble village tank would easily qualify for inclusion in the list of over 300 protected wetlands of international importance the world over. Yet, the Goa government in its wisdom deems it unworthy even to be declared a bird sanctuary. On the contrary, it has allowed the Konkan Railway to lay its tracks smack through the lake and even build a station on reclaimed land. Housing estates are inching ever closer to the lake shores. The lone forest-guard stationed there is powerless against the politically well-connected poachers that raid the lake occasionally.

In recent years, the number of migratory ducks has shown marked fluctuations (a more than 40-fold increase of lesser whistling teals against an almost 10-fold decrease in pintails), whose causes are not immediately apparent in the absence of comparative material from the now defunct AWCs. Though the waterfowl seem virtually impervious to the disturbance created by trains on the embankment through the lake, the ensuing and ever increasing bustle at the railway-station will certainly have an effect in the long run.

The waterfowl of the Carambolim lake are not under immediate threat, as yet. But their survival in the long run will depend on the Goa government's willingness to protect them.



## Mid-air Predation on Palm Swifts by a Prowling Raptor

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The pariah kite (*Milvus migrans*) is a common raptor occurring in Tiruchirapalli. Many birds can be seen circling high and low, gliding and soaring over the city and its environs. At 6 p.m. on 31 July 1998 about 250 kites against the far eastern sky and climbing high overhead, drifted north as did the thick-grey clouds and the cool breeze. A similar phenomenon happened at 6.05 p.m. on 13 November 1998, now with only about 150 kites that moved high, spread all over hawking insects in the air, joined also by the local jungle crows. They moved north and disappeared. Again, on 22 September 1999 about 150+ kites repeated the performance, coincident with the gathering of clouds without rain; there were no jungle crows to join them this time. The strange fact is that the congregation of the kites happened almost at the same point on the eastern horizon and moved West high overhead. Could they have been only resident birds?

The kites are known to consume anything that can be procured, from kitchen refuse through offal and garbage to earthworms, winged termites, lizards, mice, disabled young birds, young chickens and ducklings and bats besides (Ali, S & S.D.Ripley, 1987; Ali, S. 1996). Narayanan, E (1989) has reported on the white-breasted kingfisher having fallen a

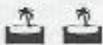
prey to the kite. The baya weaver birds are an item of its food too (Wesley, 1991).

I was scanning the sky for migratory birds over my house. By 5 p.m. on 15 September 1999 there suddenly appeared high over the typha-infested fields a 'confusion' of palm swifts (*Cypsiurus parvus*) possibly of two sub-species, the number swelling to over thirty birds. I had seen a maximum of only six or so birds at a time around my house. The abrupt increase may have been a migrant influx. That palm swifts migrate has not been known from published accounts. On the days following it, the number fell to below the 'normal'. In the midst of the restless concourse of the palm swifts were sailing, like sharks among fish shoals, a few pariah kites. The swifts suddenly twisted and turned in two groups. The cause was that a kite had snatched off a bird and sailed away, tearing it in mid-air holding it between the talons. At 5.25 pm another kite had caught a bird and, alighting on a coconut leaf-base, deplummed it. Even as a second bird had been lost to a predator, a third fell a prey to another kite. As the sun slid down the Western sky, by 6.05 pm, none of the swifts remained. Which way they went is hard to tell. The sky was clear of the raptors too.

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## Monitoring Waterbirds as a Lake Management Tool

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**E**arlier this year I went to Udaipur to participate in the Zonal Workshop on Lake Management (27 — 28 Feb. 2000) organized by Jheel Sanrakshan Samiti (JSS) and Vidyav Bhawan Society (VBS). The workshop was sponsored by Global Water Partnership (GWP) - SASTAC Regional Centre with the twin objectives of (a) identifying the issues that need to be handled for integrated management of the lakes in the western zone of India (Rajasthan, Gujarat and western Madhya Pradesh), (b) exploring the possibilities of establishing a network of NGOs, institutions, organizations interested in getting involved in lake conservation issues on a long term basis. A charter of recommendations was put together by the delegates working in small groups. This was later consolidated and fed into the main document for World Water Vision 2025 which was sent to The Hague for the Second World Water Forum in March 2000. During the workshop Dr. Tej Razdan of the JSS took us on a tour of Udaipur and showed us the extent of pollution and encroachments in the beautiful city lakes.

In his inaugural address at the workshop Mr. Jagat Mehta, ex-Foreign Secretary of the Government of India, while talking about his forays in fresh water diplomacy remarked "...imagine if one day even puja would have to be performed with a bottle of Bisleri water". This remark sums up the sad reality, namely that even plain water which was once in abundance is now fast becoming a precious commodity. But while for most of our lakes the alarm bells are ringing loud and clear, signs of a response to the crisis are also emerging in the form of public concern about their status. Also, what is now quite clear is that to develop effective strategies for their conservation and for the sustainable use of water resources, community participation is vital.

In this workshop I presented a few ideas about using waterbirds as bio-indicators and instituting bird count programmes at urban lakes. In this note I reproduce some of the points raised at Udaipur in the hope that birdwatchers will find them interesting.

I suggested that along with traditional parameters viz. assessing physico-chemical characteristics of water, counts indices of micro and macro-organisms etc., monitoring birds could be a useful supplementary exercise. While the reasons for this would be well known to most birdwatchers I enumerate some below:

1. The popular interest in birds is much greater than in any other group, and whenever volunteers are needed it is

much easier to find birdwatchers than, say, amateur botanists, limnologists and microbiologists.

2. Birds are far more visible and easier to track than their prey and their ability to find food is directly tied to the timing and success of their breeding efforts.
3. Waterbird as a group have a variety of life styles and changes in their habitat (viz. waterlevel changes due to siltation, reduction of open water areas due to spread of water Hyacinth or grasses etc.) are easily reflected in corresponding changes in their communities and populations. In the context of lakes this point is significant because birds use resources not only in the lake itself but across the whole catchment area.

Which birds to monitor is an important question. In a broad sense, waterbirds belong to two distinct categories, the migratory and resident. The migratory waterbirds use resources across the globe in a cyclical manner and their populations in any given lake will depend upon not only the conditions prevailing in the lake and its catchment area but also beyond the boundaries of the catchment area. Several factors viz. breeding in the northern nesting grounds, poaching and other detrimental factors in the intermediate staging areas will all play a part in regulating their populations. However, when the objective of the monitoring programme is to provide a better handle for lake management then resident birds can provide a reasonably good indicator of local habitat conditions. This may include heronry birds, teals, rails, jacanas etc.

For long term bird population monitoring projects for lake management it is practical to census birds on an annual basis. This is because organizing a bird count is a costly event in terms of resources and time. Since the exercise will involve volunteers it is best to time the event in such a way that birdwatchers are free to participate. So bird counts could coincide with Diwali/Dusherra holidays when more people are free to devote time to their hobbies. Alternatively, bird counts can coincide with environmental events such as World Environment Day, World Wetland Day, Wildlife Week etc.

Finally, an important question may be who will organize bird count events at urban lakes. Perhaps any local governmental or non-governmental body, which is already monitoring water quality parameter. Groups of interested citizens who are campaigning to save lakes could also initiate such programs in lakes in their cities.





The Regional Research Station, Mudigere (13° 7' 29" N 75° 37' 35" E 982 m msl) is located within a typical Malnad habitat which represents the true Western Ghats situation. It is needless to describe how beautiful and important it is in conserving the great diversity of birds. I would like to share my experience with you about the time I have spent with beautiful birds. Though I am not a regular bird watcher I do have the habit of observing birds occasionally and I carry a binocular (8 x - 20 x 50) and a field note book whenever I go to the field.

On the morning of 22nd October, 1999 at 9.00 hrs, the weather was very pleasant (Temp. 26°C, RH 95%) as I was going towards my office. Suddenly one R.C. Krishnappa, fisherman rushed towards me and requested me to catch the white breasted kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*) which was trapped in the fishing net covering the fisheries experimental pond. Immediately we reached the spot and while I was trying to take the photograph, the trapped bird escaped. Nevertheless, while returning, I heard very noisy calls of birds from a plot adjacent to the fish ponds. I slowly moved inside the plot and was thrilled to see a variety of birds. There were more than 50 species. The important point I want to stress here is that in a small habitat (75 - 100 sq m area consisting > 15 forest tree spp.) such a large number of birds were found with varying activities. I opened my binocular and identified them to the best of my knowledge. Then I went back to my office and listed them by referring to the Book of Indian Birds.

Among the birds sighted, paradise flycatcher (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) was the one which astonished me by its playful activities; and the other one was the velvet fronted nuthatch (*Sitta frontalis*) by the way it was searching for its food. The yellow checked tits (*Parus xanthogenys*) were busy with their aggressive call, chee-chee while in quest of food. Among the calls, a melodious one like the whistle of a human being, of the Malabar whistling thrush (*Myiophantus horsfieldii*) dragged me nearer to its presence. I imitated its call and to my surprise it responded immediately and started flying towards me and I could see the bird very closely and really it is a beautiful bird. Another interesting bird that I have observed was the black drongo (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) which broke the silence by uttering a variety of calls, some closely resembling other birds (shikra hawk, chloropsis, etc.). I could see many more birds. I should say this was the rarest opportunity as one could see other ground birds like grey jungle fowl (*Gallus sonneratii*), orange headed ground thrush (*Zoothera citrina*) and a water bird, the white breasted water hen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*) etc. at the same time. Any bird watcher would have loved this sight.

The birds identified are listed below :

I Family : Muscicapidae

1. Paradise flycatcher, *Terpsiphone paradisi*
2. Tailor bird, *Orthotomus sutorius*
3. Tickell's warbler, *Phylloscopus affinis*

## Unforgettable Moment

N.E. THYAGARAJ

Associate Professor of Entomology, Regional Research Station, Mudigere 577 132

4. Magpie robin, *Copsychus saularis*
5. Orange headed ground thrush, *Zoothera citrina*
6. Black bird, *Turdus merula*
7. Melebar whistling thrush, *Myiophantus horsfieldii*
8. White throated ground thrush, *Zoothera citrina cyanotus*
9. Blue throat flycatcher, *Muscicapa rubeculoides*
10. Quaker habhab, *Alcippe poiocephala*
- II Family : Paridae
11. Yellow checked tit, *Parus xanthogenys*
- III Family : Sittidae
12. Velvet fronted nuthatch, *Sitta frontalis*
- IV Family : Motacillidae
13. Yellow wagtail, *Motacilla flava*
14. White wagtail, *Motacilla alba*
- V Family : Dicaeidae
15. Tickell's flower pecker, *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*
- VI Family : Zosteropidae
16. Nilgiri white eye, *Zosterops palpebrosa*
- VII Family : Corvidae
17. Indian tree pie, *Dendrocitta vagabunda*
18. Jungle crow, *Corvus macrorhynchos*
- VIII Family : Pycnonotidae
19. Red whiskered bulbul, *Pycnonotus jocosus*
20. Red vented bulbul, *Pycnonotus cafer*
- IX Family : Irenidae
21. Common iora, *Aegithina tiphia*
22. Gold fronted chloropsis, *Chloropsis aurifrons*
- X Family : Oriolidae
23. Golden oriole, *Oriolus oriolus*
- XI Family : Cuculidae
24. Koel, *Eudynamys scolopaceus*
- XII Family : Psittidae
25. Ringed parakeet, *Psittacula krameri*
26. Lorakeet, *Loriculus vernalis*
- XIII Family : Columbidae
27. Blue rock pigeon, *Columba livia*
28. Emerald dove, *Chalcophaps indica*
29. Spotted dove, *Spontropelia chinensis*
30. Nilgiri pigeon, *Columba oenas*
- XIV Family : Bucerotidae
31. Malabar grey hornbill, *Tockus griseus*
- XV Family : Capitonidae
32. Small green barbet, *Megalaima viridis*
33. Crimson breasted barbet coppersmith, *Megalaima haemacephala*
- XVI Family : Phasianidae
34. Grey jungle fowl, *Gallus sonneratii*
- XVII Family : Alcedinidae
35. White breasted kingfisher, *Halcyon smyrnensis*
- XVIII Family : Picidae
36. Lesser golden backed wood pecker, *Dinopium benghalensis*
- XIX Family : Pittidae
37. Indian pitta, *Pitta brachyura*
- XX Family : Dicruridae
38. Racket tailed drongo, *Dicrurus paradiseus*
39. Black drongo, *Dicrurus adsimilis*
40. Hair crested drongo, *Dicrurus hottentottus*
41. White bellied drongo, *Dicrurus caerulescens*



**XXI Family : Sturnidae**

42. Jungle myna, *Acordotheres fuscus*  
 43. Hill myna, *Gracula religiosa*  
**XXII Family : Campephagidae**  
 44. Small minivet, *Pernisornis cinnamomeus*  
 45. Rufous back shrike, *Lanius schach*  
**XXIII Family : Nectariniidae**  
 46. Little spicer hunter, *Arachnothera longirostris*  
 47. Small sun bird, *Nectarinia minima*  
 48. Purple sun bird, *Nectarinia asiatica*

**XXIV Family : Gruiiformidae**

49. White breasted water hen, *Amazuramis phoenicurus*

**Reference:**

Ali,S.(1996). The Book of Indian Birds. Salim Ali Birth Centenary Edition. Revised and Enlarged.



## An Account of a "Probable" Mixed Communal Courting Behaviour in the Purple-rumped Sunbirds and Pale-billed Flowerpeckers



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The article by Vikram Gadagkar et. al., NLBW, Vol.39, No.4, on the probable communal courtship of the yellow wattled lapwing *Vanellus malabaricus* was most interesting. There are many occasions, I am sure, in every birdwatcher's life when he or she is left clueless with regard to certain bird behavior. However, if not discussed, such observations get permanently buried in one's mind unless he or she is confronted with a similar situation, which may or may not present itself ever. This is clear from their article, as the incident has taken more than five years to surface. It is better late than never though! Such notes however, have the potential to draw others from the field to make a collective effort at solving such riddles without ignoring them as aberrant behaviors.

I too would like to share a similar observation with my fellow birdwatchers in the hope of a plausible explanation. I was in Bangalore for most of 1998 & 99. During my stay, I visited many of the birding areas in and around Bangalore. On one such outing at Kalkere Reserve Forest adjacent to the Bannerghatta National Park on 25th July 1999, I came across an unbelievably large mixed-flock of purple-rumped sunbirds *Nectarinia zeylonica* and pale-billed flowerpeckers *Dicaeum erythrorhynchos* on a bamboo thicket. It was 11:00 in the morning. Initially, I thought that the mass gathering would have been caused due to a predator (probably a snake) and decided to explore the surroundings. Soon, I was sure that it was not a forced behavior as there was definitely no predator on or around the bamboo. I also investigated the nearby region to see if there was a flowering or fruiting tree, which could have drawn their attention, but couldn't find one.

The birds were extremely vociferous and in great numbers. My friends and I could count at least 13 pairs of purple-rumped sunbirds and about 16 pale-billed flowerpeckers. A solitary jungle prinia *Prinia sylvatica* was also seen in the thicket, probably as baffled as we were. At this juncture I decided to approach the location through the lantana bushes to observe the spectacle in greater detail. Unperturbed by our presence the birds continued their chattering. The male

sunbirds would repeatedly take to wing, flutter just above the females and return to their perches to regain their breath only to begin all over again. The flowerpeckers too did a similar act but it was difficult to differentiate between the sexes. In fact, the flowerpeckers were the bolder of the two species and a few individuals came as close as 4 feet from me. The birds held their positions even when I was right below the bamboo. It was obvious that the commotion was centered around the females as only the males hovered, occasionally chasing one another. On returning to their respective perches the males excitedly moved their heads from side to side accompanied by a harsh song. The flowerpeckers were in no way less audible than the sunbirds. Their display (flutter) was a little briefer compared to the sunbirds but repeated at a greater frequency.

Their bold behavior could well be attributed to their reluctance to give up a hard earned (strategic) perch. I stood there for nearly ten minutes but the activity continued with unwavering vehemence. A jumble of questions erupted within me- what caused this large agglomeration in the first place? What was the reason behind the mutual tolerance of the two species? Why were they so possessive about the bamboo thicket? Was it a communal courtship ritual? If yes, then why haven't anybody talked about it? The species' under scrutiny are fairly common for someone to neglect such a phenomenon, if it occurs regularly.

It may however be possible that a few volatile courting pairs could have stimulated the nearby individuals to go into a courting frenzy. But then, why was it a mixed flock? Is there some sort of resemblance between the courting behavior of the two species? Is it more economical to be able to court with more than one female simultaneously? Communal courtship definitely makes a lot of sense, especially amongst small birds with high metabolic rates, as it can help conserve energy that would otherwise be squandered in searching for suitable mate. Flocking is fairly well known amongst the Passeridae, as more birds are doubtlessly better equipped to detect predators even when they are preoccupied with an

activity as intense as courting. However, I am unaware of such a behavior in species' belonging to Nectariniidae. So... was it an errant incident? This seems highly improbable though! I would sincerely invite the readers to comment on this or other similar observation so as to land on a tangible answer.

I once again commend the authors of the article on the yellow wattled lapwings to have thought in similar lines. It is vital for birdwatchers to discuss their accounts with others in the field so that a logical and unbiased interpretation can be arrived at. It once again highlights the effectiveness of NLBW in bridging the gap between people with similar interests irrespective of their physical distances.



For many years now the BBC radio has run a programme called 'Desert Island Discs' in which a person is asked to assume that he or she is cast away alone on a desert island with rescue only a remote possibility. The 'castaway' is allowed ten records to take onto the Desert Island and required to give reasons for his or her choice. As a slight - and appropriate - variation I would like to choose ten species of birds I would have with me - assuming the almost impossible and completely horrifying possibility that no birds already existed on or visited the island - and give my reasons. I would, however, make one or two pre-conditions about the island; it must have a good lake, rivers and a varied type of habitat. And the birds would, at minimum, be pairs; in some species small parties.

1. Pitta: This delightful bird would be my first choice. Once the bird became trusting it would be a great joy to watch hopping around on the ground and digging violently into the mulch for insects all the while, with leaves flying and the pitta keeping a dead-pan face. In its breeding season the pitta would call from high up in the trees and at all times its colours would be flamboyant.

2. Dipper: There is no more exciting ground bird to watch than the dipper as it plunges into churning, foaming, high velocity water in mid-torrent. In more peaceful moods of evening I would watch and listen to the dipper singing happily - if somewhat hoarsely - from a stone in mid-stream while a female would be bathing and preening herself on a nearby rock in readiness for the night.

3. Osprey: To see an osprey hover over water about 60 feet up, then drop and strike the water with a most tremendous splash before disappearing below the surface and then emerge a second or two later with its prey held under foot, is a great experience. A really thrilling spectacle. A pair of ospreys used to be at Vihar Lake, Bombay, around about March and I hope they still are. If any readers in the Bombay area have never watched an osprey fishing I suggest that they could do no better than try their luck at Vihar.

4. Spotted owl: I visited the Ghana, Bharatpur, last July and was very fortunate to stay at the Rest House and have Mr. Panday for company. Adjacent to the Rest House balcony are rings on a stand - originally intended to hold potted plants. However, these rings are put to a far better use. Just on

## Castaway with Birds

D.A. STAIRMAND

Reprints from Newsletter of February 72



dusk electric lights are switched on around the Rest House and these attract night flying insects and, with them, a party of spotted owlets. The owlets use the rings as perches and these absolutely delightful birds sally to and fro from the stand all night (I know, because I got up from bed at midnight and 4 a.m. to continue my watching which had started at 7 p.m.). Sometimes the birds - up to 7 - descended to the ground and moved quickly to pick up insects but mainly they flew and returned to a perch with the victim held tightly in their claws. Whatever they did, they were delightful (sorry, but I just must use this word time and again) and form one of my most lasting and vivid impression of Indian birds.

5. Yellow wagtail: I had to have a wagtail - they are so beautiful in summer dress, but it was a hard decision to discard the grey wagtail and the yellow-headed wagtail. All wagtails are really lovely birds but the few yellow wagtails I have seen in India in summer plumage in late winter or early summer just tipped the scale in favour of this species. I make no excuses, but realise I shall probably incur the wrath of many grey wagtail enthusiasts!

6. Common green bee-eater: A strange choice, you may say. Why not the chestnut-headed or, more to the point, the blue-tailed? Perhaps it is strange, but then although I know Beethoven is the greatest composer of Western Classical music my favourite composer is Delius. So my favourite bee-eater is the common green - you all know it - and I shall have a party of 35 on my Desert Island, thank you. What fun they will be!

7. Malabar whistling thrush: It may be a bit shy but when the rainy, cloudy, stormy weather comes it will mate and build its nest and still find time to sing a lot of the day. And I can watch those marvellous flashes of cobalt against its blue-black background! I found the Himalayan whistling thrush a little disappointing - it's a fraction too big and sturdy and its song inferior. The whistling schoolboy is never disappointing.

8. Pied kingfisher: A very handsome bird and really the most exciting kingfisher that one can watch for long period of time. It perches on vantage points over water with its huge bill pointed downwards like a rifle then takes off to hover over water before plunging excitingly for its prey. It does this for hour after hour and I could watch it for year after year. Sad though, that I cannot take the three-toed forest kingfisher, too.

9. Little egret: Elegant, active and, above all, the most beautiful of all birds in its breeding plumage. Need I say more?

10. Racket-tailed drongo: A fascinating, intelligent and beautiful bird. With some luck I could tame it to visit my hut and rant on as drongos do. Always it would be at the very centre of birdlife.

So my list of ten has ended and I have had to omit personal favourites and wonderful birds such as the flamingos, falcons, redstarts, tits, sunbirds, swallows, sarus crane, flycatchers (Paradise, black and orange, fantail), minivets, pelicans and cormorants (which could have helped me with fishing), woodpeckers, rollers, orioles, hornbills, etc, etc.

The 'Desert Islander' is usually allowed a 'bonus' and for this I'll take a bird I have never seen in the wild - the blackheaded sibia. The one I remember was in a large mixed aviary at Ahmedabad Zoo and its colours and calls were pure delight.

I hope other readers will join in this game. - Editor and space permitting! The choices would certainly be varied.

[It would seem that every individual species has qualities which would justify its inclusion in the first ten and the choice would therefore have to be very arbitrary. But Mr. Stairmand has initiated an interesting game. I hope several of our readers will play it. Editor]



A review of *Nature's Spokesman*, M. Krishnan and Indian Wildlife, ed. Ramachandra Guha, OUP, pp 291

I once attended a talk on good reviewing, and among the no-nos was the tendency of biography reviewers to boast about their own hob-nobs with the subject. Your reviewer will repeatedly commit this crime. On my first visit to Madras in the early '70s, M. Krishnan and Indu invited me to a sumptuous south Indian lunch, complete with banana leaf and aching knee joints. After total satiation point, "M.K." said Well, it seems you didn't like the food after all. We were surprised, having praised every dish at every mouthful. "But you haven't burped," he objected. "In the south, a good long burp is the only legitimate compliment to the food." I did my best but could only manage a squawk. Fortunately my other companions did much better. (Both being eminent people, I won't mention their names here).

Krishnan's writings reveal this impish zest for life. The editor Ram Guha dismisses his role in the making of "Nature's Spokesman": during a recent eaves-drop I heard him say that he'd only "put together Krishnan's pieces." He has done much more, actually. The extremely good introduction and the selection of these particular 68 articles (out of some 2000 that Guha read) has already assured Krishnan an important place in the waxworks of Indian naturalists. This may not have otherwise happened; because iconoclasts like him often go beyond soliciting burps, and manage to make enemies. Krishnan was anti-establishment and socially eccentric; he was blunt and straightforward and took on many a pompous and ineffective official; he had a habit of suddenly dropping old friends for some imagined reason. This last I knew well, because I was one of the dropped; however, I continued to admire him and respect his work. Guha has convinced us that we can grant him these little eccentricities, given the worth of his contribution to the cause of conservation.

The pieces Guha has chosen display Krishnan's extraordinary learning. He makes passing - but relevant, there's the test - references to English romantic poetry, to county cricket, to the literary ecology of love in ancient Tamil literature: he even quotes, for heaven's sake, Santhi-muththap-pulavar. There are of course many personal observations of wildlife which

are invaluable, such as his theory about the ecological benefits of the "pinch period" in midsummer, when forest-dwelling animals go hungry and thirsty and may even die.

I once had the misfortune of going for a walk in Mudumalai with Krishnan and can vouch for his stamina (in spite of being a heavy smoker) and courage. I don't know if courage is the right word though; it was a sort of unfair absence of fear. Constantly repairing his archaic camera - the camera which has taken such stunning photographs - he sought, and followed, and studied the forest and its wildlife for the sake of knowing and not because he was on a grant or fellowship or assignment. Perhaps this species of naturalist will soon be extinct.

But for me the most attractive part of the book is the language itself. Krishnan was a writer of such finesse, style and elegance that one wants to read some pieces again and again. There is everywhere the charm and flair which carried the burping session, coupled of course with his intimate knowledge of the subject and a vocabulary that has one secretly poking into the Oxford every now and then. And then, there's his sense of humour... something which abandons so many writers as soon as pen hits paper. I am sure this book would be an effective reader at the high school and college level.

I have just one bone to pick and it's a very small one. I feel that Krishnan's cantankerous reference to a naturalist - who is still around, and likely to feel embarrassed - could have been left out. It is obvious however that Guha included it in order to illustrate Krishnan's airy outspokenness, and not as a validation of that particular missile.

Lastly, another word about the editing and introduction. You can't write about a learned man unless you're learned yourself, and here Krishnan has met his match. Guha's essay on his life and achievements will put M.K. on top of the list of India's ace naturalists. Sadly, it's not a very long one.



## CORRESPONDENCE

**FIRST RECORD OF NILGIRI THRUSH *ZOOTHERA DAUMA NEILGHERRIENSIS* (BLYTH) FROM SALIM ALI BIRD SANCTUARY IN KERALA.** JIJO MATHEW, Pappalil House, Keerampara, Kothamangalam, Ernakulam (Dist.), Kerala

On 10th January 2000 at 09.30 hrs. a brown coloured large, scaly thrush was observed in Thattakkad bird sanctuary and it was identified as *Zoothera dauma neilgherriensis*. This sanctuary is situated in the Ernakulam (Dist.) of Kerala. The sanctuary is the catchment area of Bhoothankettu dam. The terrain is undulating and elevation ranges between 35m. and 500m. [Latitude : 76° 45'N and longitude : 10° 7' - 11° E]. The sanctuary has tropical evergreen forest, tropical semi-evergreen forest, tropical deciduous forest and there are patches of grasslands also. It is spread in an area of 25.16 sq.km. The forest consists of tall trees of *Terminalia bellierica*, *Hopea parviflora*, *Bombax malabaricum*, *Hydrocarpus pentandra*, *Terminalia paniculata*, *Tetramala nudiflora*, *Terminalia tomentosa* etc.

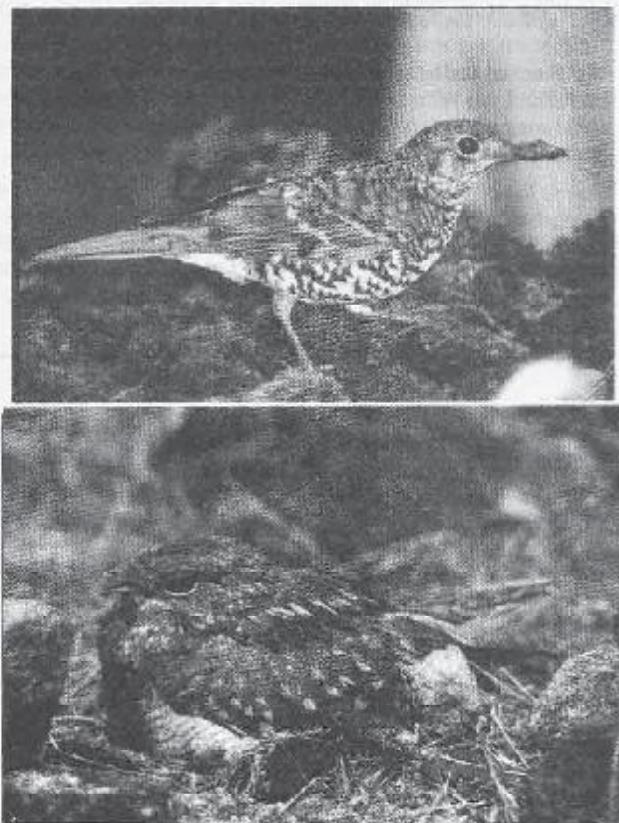
Around 09.25 hrs. while observing a pair of orange headed ground thrush (*Zoothera cyanotis*) and forest wagtail (*Dendronanthus indicus*) I saw a bird flying in and sitting near a cowpat. The bird sat about 15 from me. The bird was searching worms in the cowdung. The morning was bright and sunny, I got a very clear view of the bird. At the moment, I had my camera with me, but because of thick undergrowth it was very difficult for me to photograph the bird. But ultimately after long hours of hardwork I was able to photograph it. Later after washing the roll I identified the bird as Nilgiri thrush (*Zoothera dauma neilgherriensis*). The myna sized bird had boldly scaled upperpart and underpart with the golden fulvous spots largely suppressed. I also noticed the shy behaviour of the bird. It hopped alone silently on the floor, turning over or flicking the dry leaves in search of worms and insects in typical thrush like manner and when disturbed the bird flew up and perched on a tree. It sat motionless for a while and descended again immediately as its suspicion was allayed. I was also able to hear its call ("a sharp kree-ee"). The bird usually remained very quiet. I was very familiar with the appearance of the bird from Birds of Kerala [Salim Ali, 1984 (plate 16)]. It matched perfectly with the illustration of the Nilgiri thrush. I checked the identifying features many times over till I was able to make sure about its identity. I was able to observe this bird in the same area nearly after one month (Feb. 6th 2000).

This observation from Thattakkad, Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary point out that the distribution of *Zoothera dauma neilgherriensis*, extends to low land forests of Kerala.

**Reference:**

Ali Salim (1984); Birds of Kerala, Bombay Natural History Society, Mumbai. Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskip and Tim Inskip (1998); Birds of the Indian Subcontinent. Christopher Helm A and C Black. London.(publisher).

Ali Salim and S.D. Ripley (1983). Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan (compact edition), Oxford University Press, Delhi.



Photos : 1. Nilgiri Thrush *Zootera dauma neilgherriensis* by Jijo Mathew  
2. Franklin's nightjar *Caprimulgus affinis* by Aby Varghese



**FIRST RECORD OF NESTING OF FRANKLIN'S NIGHTJAR (*CAPRIMULGUS AFFINIS*) FROM CHARRUPARA IN KERALA.** JIJO MATHEW, Pappalil House, Keerampara, Kothamangalam, Ernakulam (Dist.), Kerala.

On 8th March, 1999 around 18.30 hrs. I was observing a pair of small green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) engaged in nest building at Charrupara (Latitude : 76°44' N and Longitude : 10°6' E) close to Salim Ali Bird Sanctuary in Ernakulam (Dist.) of Kerala. Charrupara (Altitude 50 m.) is situated on the southern bank of the river Periyar, which flows south of the Sanctuary. The major species of plants at Charrupara are *Calycopteris floribunda*, *Aporosa lindleyana*, *Cycas circinalis*, *Cathium diococcum*, *Zizyphus oenoplia* etc. Around 18.35 hrs. I heard a whistling sound from the nearby scrub jungle. I was not familiar with this call. I rushed to the spot and saw a nightjar gliding over the place. The bird was repeatedly making the call ("sweesh") for two to three minutes, and it came down and sat on a piece of rock and was engaged in hawking insects. It was getting dark so, the bird was not properly visible. By using a torch the white patch on the wings and tail was however visible. Around 18.45 hrs. I also saw another nightjar gliding over the first bird. I observed

that the second bird was a little different from the first bird. The second bird had no prominent white patch on its wings and the patch was totally absent on the tail. After nearly 1 hr. of observation I returned and referred to the Birds of Kerala (Salim Ali, 1984) and identified the bird as Franklin's nightjar (*Caprimulgus affinis*).

The next day on 9<sup>th</sup> March, about 08.00 hrs. I again visited the place and searched the spot where I saw the bird the previous night. After an hour of patient observation, I was able to find out the roosting place of the male bird under a *Melastoma malabathricum* bush. The bird was in front of me and was clearly visible. The crown and mantle was finely vermiculated and the scapulars edged with rufous buff and had large white outer tail feathers only visible during the flight. But these were absent in the female. The bird was well camouflaged and was difficult to distinguish it from its surroundings. On investigation, I was able to locate the female bird incubating about 20 ft. away from the male bird. On further investigation I was able to find out two more nests nearby. There were two eggs each, in the three nests located by me. During daytime the female was sitting on the eggs. The unusual thing about sightling was, there were two nests at a distance of only 2½ ft. from each other.

The eggs were laid on bare ground cleared of pebbles for about 2.7 inches in diameter. The eggs were oval in shape: pale reddish brown, brown blotches and smaller dark brown spots on it. These were concentrated in the middle and there were very few at the end. There is no record of group nesting, of forest birds like nightjars. The eggs took 12 days to hatch.

The average measurement of 6 eggs → 30.6 x 19.6 mm.

This observation from Charrupara points out that *Caprimulgus affinis* is a brooding resident to Kerala and it also does group nesting.

#### Reference :

Ali Salim (1984); Birds of Kerala, Bombay Natural History Society Mumbai  
Ali Salim and S.D. Ripley (1980); Handbook of the Birds of India and Pakistan (compact edition). Oxford University Press, Delhi.

(This study is a part of the monitoring of Biodiversity of Kocampara panchayat, supported by D.B.T and Centre for Ecological Science).



#### REAPPEARANCES OF MALABAR GREY HORNBILLS IN THE KODHYAMALE RESERVE FOREST OF SOUTH CANARA DISTRICT. R. SHYAMA PRASAD RAO, Center for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012.

Birds are good indicators of the health of an ecosystem. Habitat destruction is one of the most important reasons for the disappearance of any species from a particular locality. The recolonization of a species back to its original home is not a common phenomenon and so I would like to share my observations with Newsletter readers.

The Kodhyamalo Reserve Forest (12°55' N and 75°08' E) is a small dense secondary evergreen forest of about 1200 acres (elevation 250 meters) at Karinja (one of the pilgrim centers) in South Canara District. I am in close touch with the wildlife

of this forest since the past six years. The re-appearance of hornbills is an interesting case.

There were no hornbills in the forest when I started my observations. But recently I constantly heard hornbill calls and on 06.06.99 morning I saw a group of three Malabar grey hornbills on a *Ficus* tree. The next day I saw a group of five birds some distance away. So there could be more than one group of those birds. According to local sources the bird was common ten years back and thereafter disappeared. It is interesting to speculate from where the birds have come, as the surrounding areas are deforested and badly disturbed and hence the birds must have come from a long distance.



#### BIRDS WHILE JOGGING. J.L. SINGH, D3/1, Rites Flats, Ashok Vihar, Phase 3, Delhi 110 052

I have been jogging or walking my way to good health most of my life. Of late, it has been more walking and less jogging. This has helped my birdwatching as I am able to see more birds while walking than when jogging. However, even now, my walks are rather brisk as the primary objective at that time is fitness and good health. Thus, specific birding walks are separate and limited to week-ends or holidays when I can spare more time.

Be that as it may, earlier this year, I decided that even during my "fitness" walks, I could quantify whatever birding I manage. From February to June this year, I have been recording the bird species that I see or hear during the course of my walk. With the rains coming towards the end of June, walks have tended to be less regular. Rules of my self-imposed study are:

Walks between 6 and 7 a.m. only count.

I only count walks where I walk at least 30°. The average walk is more than this.

The walk is through an urban park in Ashok Vihar in North Delhi. It partially covers built up area also. The park has a fair number of large trees.

I do not stop or slow down to recognise a bird that I cannot identify beyond doubt. Only birds positively identified by sight or sound are listed on my return from the walk. This means that small birds and birds that keep quiet are often missed. I count from the moment I leave my house till I enter again. Among the survey results :

7 birds were seen on every walk. These were house sparrow, common crow, common myna, blue rock pigeon, collared or ring dove, pariah kite and redvented bulbul.

3 birds were seen or heard 95% of the time or over. These were rose-ringed parakeet, little brown dove and pied myna.

2 birds were seen or heard only once: spotted owlet, common babbler

2 birds were seen less than 10% of the time: green pigeon, red-whiskered bulbul

4 birds were mostly heard and seen only on a few occasions: tailor bird, ashy wren warbler, koel, peafowl.

Maximum number of birds on any single day: 29

Minimum number on any single day: 14

Average number: 19

This should give a casual birdwatcher in Delhi an idea of what he is likely to see when he looks around a garden or park in Delhi. The total number of species seen over the entire period was 38. The complete list is given below:

House sparrow, common crow, jungle crow, common myna, pied myna, brahmmy myna, pariah kite, rose-ringed parakeet, blossom-headed parakeet, blue rock pigeon, brown rock chat, golden backed woodpecker, white breasted kingfisher, tailor bird, ash wren warbler, purple sunbird, redstart, magpie robin, cattle egret, pond heron, grey hornbill, red vented bulbul, red whiskered bulbul, jungle babbler, grey babbler, peafowl, common babbler, hoopoe, white-breasted munia, crimson breasted barbet, large green barbet, ring dove, little brown dove, red wattled lapwing, spotted owlet, koel, green pigeon and hawk cuckoo.

I am sure readers in Delhi will find this information useful. I am continuing the walks and if I find major differences at any period, I shall let the readers of the Newsletter know.



**RECORDS OF ORIENTAL PRATINCOLE (GLAREOLA MACDIVARUM), INDIAN SKIMMER (RYNCHOPS ALBICOLLIS), INDIAN COURSER (CURSORIUS COROMANDELICUS) AND YELLOW WATTLED LAPWING (VANELLUS MALBARICUS) IN KOTA, RAJASTHAN.** JATINDER KAUR & ANIL NAIR\*, Wildlife Institute of India, Post Box # 18, Chandrabani, Dehradun, U.P., \*Hedoti Naturalists Society, 81, Shopping Centre, Kota, Rajasthan.

The sarus crane count, initiated by the Wildlife Institute of India last year (1999), has been an annual feature and is organized for a week every year starting from 21st June. During the count this year (2000), on 21st June we visited Alnia dam, 25 kms from Kota city. We spotted a few unusual birds along with the sandgrouse and redwattled lapwings on the mud bank. Initially, it was difficult to identify the species, but when one of them flew from the bank showing prominent red under-wing coverts, I thought that it could be the oriental pratincole (*Glareola macdivarum*).

We hired a boat from a fish contractor to have a closer look at these birds. On closer observation, we were delighted to see twenty-seven of them. They had a strong peachy orange coloration on breast and belly. Since the colour pattern of these birds indicated breeding plumage (Grimmett et al 1998), we searched the mud banks for nests, but could not locate any. This was perhaps the first record of oriental pratincole in Kota district. The second author has recorded these birds in Palighat while participating in the Chambal River expedition - 1998 from Keshoraypattan - Kota to Dholpur in Rajasthan.

On the same day three Indian skimmers were also recorded along with a group of river terns. Previously in 1990, Vyas recorded seven Indian skimmers at the same Alnia dam (Vyas 1990). The sighting of four Indian coursers and one yellow wattled lapwing was also recorded for the first time in Alnia dam (Vyas pers.comm.).

#### Reference :

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Sanghe, H.S. (1958). Sightings of Indian Skimmer (*Rynchos albicollis*) in Rajasthan far from its fluvial habitat. Newsletter for Birdwatchers. Vol. 38, No. 5.  
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#### A NOTE ON THE INCIDENT OF JUVENILE GREY WAGTAIL (MOTACILLA CINEREA) SPITTING YELLOWISH LIQUID WHEN HANDLED. KIRAN PURANDARE, 62/A, 'Prashant', Erandawane Gaonthan, Off Karve Road, Pune 411 004

While birdwatching at Dhundi (District: Kullu, Himachal Pradesh) I spotted an adult male grey wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*) with an insect in its beak. The bird was perched at the edge of a boulder, awaiting clearance. As we went away, it landed amongst boulders and shrubbery on the banks of the river Beas. I tried to spot the male through my binoculars (Berkut 8x40, made in Russia) but could not find any trace of it. After a lull for about a minute, the male suddenly sprang from the base of a huge boulder and took to flight uttering its familiar 'Chichip Chichip' call. Within the next 5 minutes an adult female (without the black throat but yellow on breast) arrived with some food. As it saw a passer by, it flew off and started circling around the place where the nest was hidden. It was clear that the pair was disturbed due to a bridge on the Beas river, quite close to their nest. However, the birds managed to feed their chicks whenever the level of disturbance was moderately low. In the meanwhile I tried to find out the nest but could not succeed. The male and the female continued to feed the chicks with regular intervals. Suddenly I saw a porter coming down from the mountain and picking up the chick in his right hand. The porter, a young man crossed the bridge and approached us. He laughed at us and said 'Chidai hain'. All of us gathered together and requested him to let the chick free. He instantly agreed to our proposal and handed over the chick to us. It was a juvenile grey wagtail with short stubby tail and overall pale plumage. While examining the young one I found a few blood sucking mites on the ramiiges as well as near the rump. The mites were a little smaller than the bed bugs and dark black in colour. While examining the bird, it suddenly opened its beak and spat some watery substance on my palm. The liquid was yellow and appeared to me like digestive juice. After this incident I did not hold the chick any more and released it.

What was that liquid? Was it a part of the bird's defensive mechanism?

My friends Pushkar Vaidya, Sujay Malve and Madhura Tokekar also witnessed the episode.

Readers and experts are requested to give their comments

**Checklist of birds recorded during the trail from  
Manali Township to Beas Kund**

**Observation period: 15/6/2000 to 19/6/2000**

1. Black francolin - (*Francolinus francolinus*): Call heard during journey between Sundernagar and Kralpur Sahib.
2. Himalayan woodpecker - (*Dendrocopos himalayensis*)
3. Scaly-bellied woodpecker - (*Picus squamatus*): seen in apple orchards near Vashisht feeding on the ground
4. Common hoopoe - (*Upupa epops*)
5. Eurasian cuckoo - (*Cuculus canorus*)
6. Oriental scops owl - (*Otus sunia*): Seen in the heart of the city at about 7:15 pm.
7. Mountain imperial pigeon - (*Ducula badia*)
8. Oriental turtle dove - (*Streptopelia orientalis*): Quite common throughout the trail till Bakartha.
9. Lammergeier - (*Gypaetus barbatus*): Observed at Beas Kund, Gulaba and Dhundi. Solitary. Also observed in company with Himalayan griffon vultures.
10. Himalayan griffon - (*Gyps himalayensis*): Very closely observed at Gulaba. Commonly seen everywhere.
11. Shikra - (*Accipiter badius*)
12. Lesser kestrel - (*Falco naumanni*) Unspotted back and white claws.
13. Common kestrel - (*Falco tinnunculus*): It had caught some reptile in its talons and was eating it on a cliff, near Jogini falls.
14. Long-tailed shrike - (*Lanius schach*)
15. Yellow-billed blue magpie - (*Urocissa erythrorhynchos*): Seen only once through a hotel window at Vashisht in apple orchards.
16. Large-billed crow - (*Corvus macrorhynchos*): These large crows are capable of soaring at great heights. For the first few days we were quite impressed by their soaring, gliding and diving activities and often misunderstood them for 'bird of prey'.
17. Eurasian golden oriole - (*Oriolus oriolus*)
18. Long-tailed minivet - (*Terpsiphone ethologus*): Seen for a brief period at Gulaba.
19. Ashy drongo - (*Dicrurus leucophaeus*): It is called a pugnacious bird due to its aggressive nature. It drove away a lesser kestrel which inadvertently entered into its territory. Later its nest and four chicks were found in that area.
20. White-throated brown dipper - (*Cinclus cinclus*)
21. Brown dipper - (*Cinclus pallasi*)
22. Blue-capped rock thrush - (*Monticola cinclorhynchus*)
23. Blue whistling thrush - (*Myiotheretes caeruleus*): One of the most commonly seen bird throughout the trail. A nest was found under a rock overhang near Beas Kund. The bird was collecting nesting material and constructing its nest. It ranged between crowded townships like Manali to quiet places like Beas Kund.
24. Eurasian blackbird - (*Turdus merula*)
25. Asian brown flycatcher - (*Muscicapa dauurica*): Seen once near Dhundi, performing its regular flycatching from the top of a dead tree.
26. Verditer flycatcher - (*Eumyias thalassinus*) Spotted near Vashisht.
27. White-tailed rubythroat - (*Luscinia pectoralis*): Noticed only at Bakartha. Its typical behavior of sitting on a rock and singing beautifully is worth watching.
28. White-capped water redstart - (*Chalcomitra leucoccephala*): Commonly seen at and beyond Dhundi. Even a nest, which was in its initial stages of construction, was seen at Kinni nullah. Quite confounding. Gives you ample chance to observe through field glasses even at close quarters.
29. Plumbeous water redstart - (*Rhyacornis fuliginosus*): Seen at Manali along Beas, hardly at Dhundi and above.
30. Grey bushchat - (*Saxicola ferrea*): Female was observed carrying nesting material in its beak at Dhundi.
31. Common starling - (*Sturnus vulgaris*)
32. Common myna - (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*)
33. Jungle myna - (*Acanthorhynchus tenuirostris*) A.F. *fuscus*: Greyish-blue upperparts and lemon-yellow iris.
34. Bar-tailed tree creeper - (*Certhia himalayana*): Observed only at Gulaba on Oak, Pinus and Deodar trees. Inspects under the bark,

crevices for insects in the manner of a nuthatch. Tail is pressed to support the vertical stance.

35. Spot-winged tit - (*Parus melanotrophus*)
36. Green-backed tit - (*Parus monticolus*): Very common especially in the Dhundi region. A family consisting of parents and two juveniles was observed among the roadside vegetation near Gulaba.
37. Winter wren - (*Troglodytes troglodytes*): A timid bird seen mostly above treeline among rocks. Quickly enters into low bushes when disturbed. Often perches atop boulders with the short tail held almost vertically.
38. Himalayan bulbul - (*Pycnonotus leucogenys*)
39. Black bulbul - (*Hypsipetes leucocephalus psammitis*): Clearly noticeable fork in the tail, grey ear-coverts, paler slate grey if compared with its races found in the Western Ghats and Sri Lanka.
40. Oriental white-eye - (*Zosterops psipebrosus*)
41. Striated laughingthrush - (*Garrulax lineatus*)
42. Variegated laughingthrush - (*Garrulax variegatus*)
43. Whiskered yuhina - (*Yuhina flavicoxa*): Observed in low-lying bushes near Dhundi. Two to three birds were seen together.
44. House sparrow - (*Passer domesticus*)
45. Russet sparrow - (*Passer rufifrons*)
46. White wagtail - (*Motacilla alba*)
47. Grey wagtail - (*Motacilla cinerea*): A porter found a juvenile grey wagtail and intended to take it along with him. On our request he handed it over to us and we released it in the vicinity of its nest on the banks of river Beas.
48. European goldfinch - (*Carduelis carduelis*)
49. Dark-breasted rosefinch - (*Carpodacus rubicollis*)
50. Dark-rumped rosefinch - (*Carpodacus edwardi*)
51. Spot-winged rosefinch - (*Carpodacus rodopeplus*)
52. Wh te winged grosbeak - (*Mycerobas campes*)
53. Rock bunting - (*Emberiza cia*)

[1] *list compiled by Mr. Kiran Purandare.*

Note [A] Binoculars used - 1. Berkut: 8 x 40 (Made in Russia.)

2. Olympus: 10 x 50 (Made in Japan)

[B] Weather condition: Medium to heavy rains, occasional clear sky, white-outs, in the morning and the evening commonly experienced throughout the trail.

[C] Reference: The Birds of Indian Subcontinent, by Richard Grimmett, Carolyn Inskip & Tim Inskip.



#### **FEEDING HABITS OF BARBETS. H.S.A. YAHYA, Dept. of Wildlife Sciences (Formerly known as Centre for Wildlife & Ornithology), A.M.U., Aligarh**

I would like to comment on the note of Lt. Gen. Baljit Singh in the recent Newsletter (Vol. 40 (3): 32) regarding his observation on barbets. I have extensively worked and written on barbet's ecology, biology and he should refer to my recent publication (J.B.N.I.S vol. 107 (1) : 103-116). Almost all species of Indian barbets consume insects, more so during the breeding season. So the answer to his first query is 'yes'. There is a great deal of rivalry, competition and jealousy in sympatric congeneric species of barbets, so much so that the larger one often enlarges the nest entrance of the smaller and destroys the nest contents: eggs, nestlings. The coppersmith barbets in question might have been agitated by the arrival of the great barbet, especially if there was a nest of the former in the vicinity. There is no report of one barbet eating the young of other species, neither have I recorded any such event during my prolonged observations on barbets. Mr. Singh may also consult my paper on breeding biology of barbets in JBNHS (Vol. 85 (3) : 493-522 & vol. 88 (3) : 454 - 455). Some information on dietary requirements of

biology of barbets in JBNHS (Vol. 85 (3) : 493-522 & vol. 88 (3) : 454 - 455). Some information on dietary requirements of crimson-throated barbets-*Megalaima rubricapilla* is given in Yahya 1990 (Zoo's Print Vol. 5 (1) : 7), while a synopsis of my Ph. D. thesis published in NLBW vol. 33 (5): 91-92 provides a comprehensive account on the ecology and biology of Indian barbets.



#### **POSTSCRIPTS ON FLYCATCHERS.** Lt. Gen. BALJIT SINGH, "Sakhua", P.O. McCluskie Gunj, Dist. Ranchi, Bihar 839 208

I had a confirmation on the behaviour of the Monarch flycatcher. Sitting by a large, rain water storage, open tank landscaped in between natural rocks and trees in the compound of our cottage, I was joined by a female Monarch. She alighted on a branch of the wild jamun tree (*Eugenia jambolana*) partly over hanging the tank. For a while she flitted about the branch and once assured of my bird-friendly credentials she dived straight into the water, submerging upto the abdomen and pulled-up back to the perch all in one smooth flash. Drooping and half fanning out her wings, she fluffed the body feathers and preened all over with her beak and neck with great intent and in a kind of ecstasy. This lasted nearly two minutes and then she was gone. There were larva and insects skimming the water but the bird had not targeted them as there was just no evidence of chewing or swallowing on re-emerging from the dive. This appeared a deliberate act of water-bathing and whether it is their normal life-style or driven to by the summer temperature is for the ornithologists to unravel? Or enlighten us amateurs if this is an established behaviour.

Relevant to this observation is the fact that for every one sighting of the Monarch there would be nearly twenty of the white-throated fantail flycatchers within our cottage compound. The latter sub-species has never been seen hunting for insects over or dipping into any water-collections in or about our compound. The Monarch and paradise flycatchers have revealed this trait on two occasions. Incidentally, according to the distribution map in "Birds of the Indian sub-continent" (page 600) the white-throated fantail flycatcher does not occur in Bihar though the factual status, atleast on the Chota Nagpur plateau here is to the contrary.

I am tempted to share an amusing aside. There are two king crows that hunt for insects / skimmers (?) from this tank most mornings and evenings. They seem also to enjoy putting up this display. But what amuses me is their discrimination between our pet mongrels and the labrador.

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For, they ignore the mongrels but love to tease the labrador (being an exotic I suppose), even though he is too gentle and trained not to get provoked into chasing or barking at other living creatures (except the two-legged). The king crows descend to the lowest of branches, even onto stalks of grass, chirrup at the labrador flirtatiously and fly suggesting "catch-me-if-you-can".

I think I have been singularly lucky to witness repeated, random displays of this particular behaviour of the Monarch flycatcher. Once again it was a female monarch, over the same water tank and on the same over hanging branch of the jamun tree. Only this time she alighted on the branch where it is barely three feet above the water. She looked me in the eye, brimming with fearless happiness and then surveyed the water. She launched into a slow, shallow glide to a spot about four feet from where her perch had been, checked the glide for a millisecond and in that process the wings resembled the concave sails of a boat taut against the breeze that dipped the lower half of her body into the water. Without any discernible check in the aerodynamics of the glide, she pulled up and about and flew back to the same perch. Fluffing the feathers into a near orb she preened and cheeped all the while in gay abandon. The next moment she was gone !! And with this I finally rest my case.



#### **HOUSE SPARROW (PASSER DOMESTICUS) DISAPPEARING FROM THE URBAN AREAS.** HARISH R BHAT, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012

Chirp.. chirp.. chirp, early in the morning one could hear this call till a few years back very frequently. These little birds would fly in large groups treating human habitation as their own habitat. On the wooden ceilings of old houses, behind old portraits hung on the wall they would noisily gather, roost and breed! Also in front of the grain merchants shop one could see them pecking the scillover grains. But today, where have these sparrows gone? Are they shifting to villages? Do they try to avoid heavy pollution?

When ornithologists were consulted, they said one of the reasons may be the modern style architecture of the houses. People go for concrete slab buildings. This might make the sparrows shift their habitats. Another reason could be the usage of insecticides in agriculture resulting in lack of caterpillars and other insects for the sparrows to feed on. We find sparrows only in the villages where there is still tiled roof houses, and places where the farmers use less insecticides.

**Cover :** Mallard (*Anas platyrhynchos*). The male mallard has a metallic green head and neck, yellow bill, narrow white collar and chestnut breast. Mallard is one of the most common and widespread ducks in the world and acknowledged as the ancestor of all our domestic ducks. This typical dabbling duck feeds by tipping tail-up to reach aquatic plants, seeds, tadpoles and worms. When disturbed the mallard takes off almost vertically off the water and swiftly flies away with powerful wing strokes, which produce a distinct whistling sound.

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS

# *Newsletter for Birdwatchers*

**Vol. 40    No. 6    Nov. - Dec. 2000**



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## Editorial

### Avian Helpers

In his interesting series in the Hindu, under the heading SENSE & NONSENSE, Madhav Gadgil writes about the common green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) and has said that 40% of the breeding pairs had the privilege of having a helper who

assisted the parents all through the breeding cycle including incubation and feeding the chicks during their early life. When I enquired from Madhav who has done this research he said it was a person called S. Sridhar and his colleague K. Preveen Karanth. So, as happens occasionally, we do not know what's going on under our noses.

On Investigation I found that Sridhar and Karanth wrote in Current Science (25-9-93) about the painstaking research they had conducted.

"A three-year study of breeding behaviour in the small green bee-eaters (*Merops orientalis*) conducted in and around Bangalore, revealed that in 40% of the nests studied, a solitary helper assisted the breeding pair in nesting activities. In such nests the duration of the nesting was significantly reduced and the number of chicks fledged per nest was significantly higher. It was also observed that nests with helpers were more during the season following poor rainfall than those following good rainfall".

And this study led to an interesting discussion about the evolutionary and genetic advantages to the helper, by foregoing breeding himself, and instead, helping a close relative (preferably the father) to raise a larger brood than he would have done unaided. In Resonance (April 2000) Raghavendra Gadagkar refers to a study done by Emien and Wrega on white fronted bee-eaters in Kenya. "About 50% of all nests have at least one non-breeding helper that participates in excavating and defending the nest, incubating the eggs and feeding the nestlings and fledglings". Here is fascinating information.

### Protect Biodiversity and Produce more Wood

Most of us assume that mono-culture and biodiversity are mutually exclusive. But Dr. Joseph George has drawn our attention to some notes from the Forest Harvesting Bulletin (FAO) about how to encourage some mixing of the two. People who plant eucalyptus or casuarina commercially may be interested. Here are a few tips :

1. During site preparation, woody debris can be piled or windrowed to provide biodiversity without affecting productivity.
2. Small patches of forest can be designated as reserves within the stand to maintain living and standing dead trees throughout the growing cycle. These mini-reserves can be established around small wetlands that are naturally low in productivity but high in biodiversity.
3. During weeding and thinning operations a small percentage of non-plantation species of trees can be retained to provide a wider variety of habitat. These trees may be commercially valuable in the future and they will increase bird and insect biodiversity in the stand.
4. Individual dead or dying trees can be retained in the stand for cavity nesting birds and mammals. Even one standing dead tree per hectare can result in a considerable increase in biodiversity.

5. It is impossible to manage forests intensively for timber production without having some impact on biodiversity. By adopting strategies such as those recommended above, it is possible to minimize negative impacts on biodiversity while maintaining a high level of wood production. To a considerable degree, we can have our cake and eat it when it comes to sustainable forestry.

#### From the Archives

In Vol. 3, No. 1 of January 1963, there is a report about the 2nd Annual General Meeting of the Subscribers to the Newsletter for Birdwatchers, held on 23rd December 1962. One paragraph caught my eye : "Dr. Salim Ali recommended

that the Birdwatchers' Field Club of India should be constituted with the object of doing field work and studying the life-histories of the birds of the country. This work was of the highest importance, and apart from contributing material for the Newsletter, the various regional editors should also act as regional secretaries of this club. Dr. Salim Ali would be sending out a circular to guide the regional editors detailing the type of work which should be done."

I wonder if Salim Ali ever sent this letter to any of the erstwhile regional secretaries. If this is extant with any of you please send me a copy.



I was keen to visit Bharatpur in summer as my numerous earlier trips had all been mostly in winter, with a few during the monsoons. So, on the 10th and 11th of June, I found myself in Bharatpur along with my wife and son, and a friend and his family comprising wife, a son and a daughter, both teenaged. While all of them have a more than average interest in birding, it was basically my son, Jatin, who is as keen on wildlife in general and birds specifically as I am. We left Delhi by road at 7.30 in the morning on the 11th. After a leisurely uneventful trip, we made it to Bharatpur a little after midday. Having been munched odds and ends during most of the journey, we lost no time on arrival and were soon in the sanctuary itself. What followed was a very rewarding day and a half of watching our feathered friends.

The initial effect on entering the sanctuary was dreadfully disappointing. Compared to the myriad of waterfowl that greet you at other times of the year, there was virtually no water and almost no birds in sight. It was only after we had walked for some time that we realized that it was only the relative lack of abundance that hit us. Very soon, we were logging additional species almost as fast as we would have in winter. The latter months bring in hordes of migratory birds from colder climes. The abundance of these migrants tends to make you ignore the more mundane indigenous birds. With no competition, these smaller birds come into their own in summer. To enhance the effect, most are now in their nuptial plumage making them more colourful and visible.

Take weaver birds for instance. In the winter the male and female are a drab brown, hardly deserving even a glance. An old friend refers to such birds as LBJs or Little Brown Jobs. In June, they are in their bridal finery. Unlike humans, with most birds it's the male that dresses up, the noticeable exceptions being jacanas and bustard quails. The common weaver (*Ploceus philippinus*) male, for instance, develops a bright yellow crown and chocolate brown upper parts streaked with yellow. The striated weaver (*P. manyar*) is equally well-adorned but with its breast boldly streaked with dark brown, almost black. Both these weavers are seen together in Bharatpur.

## Summer-time in Bharatpur

JL SINGH

D3/1, Rites Flats, Ashok Vihar (Phase 3), Delhi 110 052

On the main road that leads from the entry to the temple complex in the middle of the sanctuary, from a point roughly half-way to the temple, there is a *bundh* about 15 meters on the right of the road, stretching as far as the temple. There are bushes and trees on the bundh. All along this bundh were a succession of weaver bird colonies. In the upper reaches of the trees were all common weavers, while in the lower bushes there were only striated weavers. For both species nests were in various stages of construction, but mostly at the helmet stage. We got an excellent chance to compare the two species with respect to their appearance, the shape and size of the nests, etc. The height separation is total and we found no case of an overlap.

A big advantage of June is that you see a lot of nesting activity. This is totally missing in winter. Of course, the best time for nests is the monsoons when most trees in the sanctuary get covered with nesting storks, ibis, cormorants, egrets, etc. However, even at this time, we noted an abundance of other nests. Almost every tree at the water's edge tended to have a pied myna (*Sturnus contra*) nest roughly 4-5 meters above the water's surface. All nests were towards the water and not on the side of the path. One interesting nest was that of a white-breasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*). It was at the end of a fallen tree branch just at the water's edge but quite visible. Jatin climbed over the branch and was able to note that it contained 5 eggs. Other notable nests that we found were one of a magpie robin (*Copsychus saularis*) in the crotch of a tree, a number of crimson-breasted barbets (*Megalaima haemacephala*), a brahminy myna (*S. pagodarum*) once and many of rose-ringed parakeets (*Psittacula krameri*).

For obvious reasons, the number of visitors, both human and avian, in summer is much smaller than the winter. But one visitor we did note was the pied-crested cuckoo (*Cacomantis jacchus*). There was an abundance of them around the Rest House as well as in the sanctuary itself.

One bird that was very common in North India in the past but is not seen too often now is the sarus crane (*Grus antigone*).

For all its hype, primarily since it is becoming extinct, the Siberian crane (*G. leucogeranus*) in my opinion is not as elegant as the homegrown sarus. With the sarus also becoming scarce, we need to give it the kind of publicity that the Siberian now gets. How can we forget the sight of about 20 saruses in a shallow pool towards the evening of our visit? The cranes were scattered in groups of 2 - 6 or so, and in each group there was at least one pair prancing and dancing in the typical crane style. The trumpeting call that one of the more amorous males added to his prancing only enhanced the pleasure of the most enthralling half-hour of watching that we had. To complete the total picture of tranquillity, a short distance away, a group of about a dozen flamingos stood in stately pride, conveying to you by their stance that they were not overawed by the eye-catching performance that the saruses were providing.

While Bharatpur is well known for its birds, the unfeathered fauna cannot be ignored. Bharatpur's pythons are well advertised by the staff and cycle-rickshaw driver-cum-guides. We did not see any on this trip as it was obviously too hot for them to come out. We did see one of the python's smaller cousins though. At one point at the edge of a culvert, Jatin noticed a snake's head sticking out of the water. While we sat quietly for some time, a little more of the snake emerged leaving no doubt that it was a checkered keel-back (*Xenochrophis piscator*). The children were fascinated by the very neat geometric pattern on this snake's body and spent a fair amount of time watching it. Their patience was well rewarded when they discovered that an entire family had made the culvert its home. Ultimately, we were able to count at least 6 keel-backs.

About half a kilometer down the same path, we noticed a small Indian mongoose (*Herpestes auropunctatus*) slinking into a

bush as we approached. When we reached the spot where we had first seen it, we found a freshly killed checkered keel-back, with its tail still twitching, lying just off the path. It was obviously dead as its head was bitten and squashed. We had inadvertently disturbed the mongoose in the process of killing the unfortunate reptile, but had deprived the former of its meal. We quickly walked about 30 meters ahead and watched the spot through binoculars. In spite of waiting for about half an hour, the mongoose did not return.

The common mongoose (*H. edwardsi*), which is much larger than the small Indian mongoose, is also common in Bharatpur. I have seen it virtually every time I have visited. One crossed our path just 10 meters ahead of where we were and gave us a good view. Another common mammal is the Neel Gai (*Boselaphus tragocamelus*). We saw at least 6 specimens, a male on two occasions and females the rest of the time. Another common sight was tortoises sitting on exposed logs and fallen trees. They slid or dropped into the water as soon as we approached. Not knowing much about tortoises, except that they win races, I do not know what species they were. These had a yellow stripe running on the face.

It is not my intention to list all the various birds that we saw. Suffice to say that the trip was most rewarding. I must mention the paradise flycatchers (*Terpsiphone paradisi*) that we were able to see. We spotted a female and an immature male with red streamers. Unfortunately, we were unable to see an adult male. Overall my expectations were fully met. The summer visit was as eventful and satisfying as any winter tour. In spite of the full summer heat and virtually none of the park facilities that you find in winter operational, we felt good at the end of the trip. When we were back in Delhi, my wife probably summed up our feelings best when she said that she was feeling tired but refreshed.



**T**he Banyan tree (*Ficus benghalensis*) popularly known as the small banyan tree (SBT) in Rishi Valley came to fruit in the third week of December (1999). The branches from the top to the lowest that swooped down to a mere five feet above the ground were laden with the red and golden yellow globules, serving as an invitation to the local fruit-eating birds and other creatures. The response was tremendous and birds feasted and gorged themselves on the luscious offerings.

I spent an hour sitting quietly under this tree one cool morning with the sun rays piercing through the mist and leaves, watching the frenzy of activity going on above me. The three striped palm squirrels were making merry as they fed, jumped and ran along the branches chasing one another. They looked happy, contented and carefree as they bounced from branch to branch.

A loud shrieking 'kik-kik-kik' diverted my attention from the playful squirrels to a quarrelsome duo of female koels. They were squabbling over their rights to feed at a particular branch

## An Hour under a Fruiting Ficus

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and they were very vocal in voicing their dissent at each other's encroachment into their domains. Soon they were on their wings the dominant one having successfully evicted the meeker rival and pursued her till she was well out of her territory. She then resumed feeding at her favourite branch in peace. Looking around I could see several koels all over the tree - the males were more conspicuous by their uniform black plumage whereas the females in their dull speckled attire merged amongst the sun-dappled foliage.

A noisy flock of common mynas arrived and spread out amongst the top branches. A flash of gold announced the arrival of an exquisitely elegant male golden oriole. A harsh call from a nearby branch revealed another bird. There were more of them - mostly females - green and pale yellow in colouration concealed amongst the large leaves. Another bird inconspicuous till it moved around was the coppersmith. A careful look revealed over 20-30 birds strewn all over the canopy, busily engaged in feeding.

A pair of treepies flew in gracefully with their long tails and immaculate plumage like an aristocratic couple at a wedding party. They appeared fastidious and pecked at a fruit here and sampled another at yet another branch. Then there were the bellicose grey drongos who seemed to be keen to dislodge the docile visitors. They picked up insects from within the canopy and showed no interest in the figs.

With a loud metallic call-note a haircrested drongo flew in from the nearby eucalyptus tree where it had been feeding on nectar. Its glossy plumage glistened in the sunlight and revealed shades of green and blue.

A flock of small minivets consisting of two males in brilliant orange, grey and black plumage and three sober coloured females flew past. A flock of whiteheaded babblers rummaged through the leaf litter, methodically. A grey wagtail landed on the ground and foraged for insects actively moving about bobbing its tail. A redbreasted flycatcher (with no trace of red on its breast) gave a weak 'chirr' as it cocked its tail, revealing

the inverted black 'T' pattern bordered with white feathers on its tail from a low bush. A minute later it was daintily hopping on the ground in pursuit of an insect, just a few feet from where I sat.

Like an apparition, in white, a lovely male paradise flycatcher flew into view, its long streamers trailing behind as it hawked a fly in mid-air and returned to a bougainvillea bough to consume it in leisure. It remained there for the next fifteen minutes preening and resting.

A pair of jungle crows were harassing a black kite which was nesting on the upper branches of the banyan tree. Greenish leaf warblers gleaned insects from amongst the leaves and a Blyth's rood warbler kept calling from a nearby bush. Up in the canopy the activity continued as ever - there was a constant movement of birds to and from the tree. An hour had gone by even before I realized it. It was now time for me to leave and reluctantly I left my avian friends at their favourite tree.



**A**fter a gap of several years, this summer I took a break from my ongoing academic pursuits, and visited my hometown Dehra Dun. Much has changed in the city over the years. The once sleepy little town has got transformed into a bustling and clamoring city, with all signs of urban decay. The litchi gardens and the basmati rice fields, for which the city was once famous, have made way for rapidly mushrooming residential colonies. The Mussoorie ranges of hills that adorn the northern periphery of the valley are barely visible now due to a perpetual haze that hangs over the city. All this has had its impact on the rich bird life, a mixture of hill and plains birds, which Dehra Dun once boasted of. However, amidst all this gloom and decay there still exist a few pockets of green, like the Forest Research Institute (FRI), The Indian Military Academy, and the campuses of various schools, where one can get a glimpse of Dehra Dun's pristine glory. Also, luckily the high rise building culture, that is so rampant in other cities, has yet not fully reached Dehra Dun. One can still find the conventional single storied houses. In most of these houses we can still find some sort of a garden, to which birds of various types come flocking.

Our house, with its two mango and a litchi tree attracts numerous feathered visitors. The birds that I was able to locate in our garden this summer included the jungle babblers, the redvented bulbul, Indian mynas, koels, magpie robins, brahminy mynas, purple sunbirds, tree pines, and the tailor bird. One of the most frequent visitors to our garden was the sparkling little tailor bird (*Orthotomus sutorius*). This little olive-green bird with rust coloured crown and two elongated cocked up tail feathers could be seen gaily moving around the compound. It almost entirely confined itself to our garden. Its cheerful calls intermixed with those made by the purple sunbird (*Nectarinia asiatica*) could be heard throughout the day. This

## Birds in my Garden

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summer I was also fortunate enough to closely observe a pair of nesting Indian mynas (*Acridotheres tristis*). A pair of these birds had built a nest in one of the mango trees in our garden. Watching the tremendous patience and enthusiasm these nesting mynas displayed was indeed a very humbling experience. I was able to observe almost the entire nesting process of the mynas, right from the time they first started collecting twigs for their nest. The mynas had a brood of three young ones. One of the most memorable moments was watching these young birds attempt their maiden flights. For one of these birds this almost ended in a disaster, with its landing smack in the middle of our lawn. However, it was soon able to recover and scamper to safety, having learnt its first lesson in flying the hard way, but nevertheless having learnt it well.

Often early in the morning one could get to see a few wiretailed swallows (*Hirundo smithii*) perched in small groups over the electricity wires. The sight looked even more enchanting when after an overnight shower with the rain drops still hanging on the wires, the swallows could be seen sitting huddled close to one another in an orderly manner. If the mornings belonged to the swallows, in the evenings we could get to see an acrobatic performance by the alpine swifts (*Apus melba*). Late in the evenings the alpine swifts could be seen frolicking around in small groups. They darted around at great speed, often coming close to the ground. The dexterity, with which the swifts dived and took off, twisted and turned, reminded you of the legendary Kamikazes. Evenings were also the time when the magpie robin (*Copsychus saularis*) rendered its beautiful summer song. Throughout the summer the magpie robins could be commonly seen perched on rooftops and trees lustily singing. The setting sun behind the distant mountains

and the swifts dancing in the sky to the song of the magpie robins was indeed a beautiful sight.

#### The Magnificent Jacaranda Tree

Though the birds that visited our garden were all a delight to watch, the truly magnificent sight was to be found on a huge jacaranda tree, which was there just outside our compound. On any given day one could see numerous birds perched on its branches. Early in the morning and again late in the evenings, twenty to thirty blossomheaded parakeets (*Psittacula cyanocephala*) used to visit the jacaranda tree. With so many of these maroon headed parakeets perched on the tree it felt as if the jacaranda had an unusual blossom. Sometimes, though very seldom, I was also able to spot a few himalayan slatyheaded parakeets (*Psittacula himalayana*) perched on the jacaranda tree. Occasionally, infact only thrice, I saw two common grey hornbills (*Tockus bimaculatus*) perched on this tree.

One day late in the afternoon as I sat admiring the jacaranda tree, I spotted a bird on it. At first I thought that the bird was a black drongo. Black drongos (*Dicrurus adsimilis*) are a common sight, and can be seen perched on top of electricity poles and other vantage points. This particular bird that I had mistaken for a black drongo was indeed an Indian drongo-cuckoo (*Surniculus lugubris*). It soon revealed its identity by letting out its distinctive call. I was not fortunate enough to see duetting drongo-cuckoos (Gopi Sunder and Rajah Jaypal, NLBW, Vol. 39, No. 5, 72). However, just a glimpse of the bird was exciting enough. Maybe, the proximity of our house to the FRI campus had made this bird stray to the jacaranda tree. I was only able to spot the bird once.

#### Strange activity in the pied myna's nest

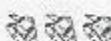
Other than the regular visitors to the jacaranda tree, the tree also had permanent residents. They were a pair of pied mynas (*Sturnus contra*). Towards the middle of May, I started noticing these birds laboriously building a nest. They used to make numerous sorties throughout the ensuing days, fetching building materials for their nest, and in the process used almost

anything from twigs to abandoned videotapes to build their nest. After about a gap of ten days of hard labour, their huge globular nest was ready. The nest with the videotapes hanging from it flapping in the air was very conspicuous, and it attracted the attention of all those passing by. However, after a gap of few days, I started noticing some strange activity in the nest. Everyday a pair of koels (*Eudynamys scolopaceus*) started visiting the nest. The koels used to visit the myna's nest at least twice everyday, once in the morning then again late in the evenings. Each time the koels visited the nest there were acrimonious scenes, with the mynas calling in great panic. After initially showing some aggression the mynas usually flew off and perched themselves some distance away from the nest, constantly observing their nest and never losing sight of it. They returned to the nest only after the koels had left. This routine was repeated everytime the koels came. This strange activity in the pied myna's nest was still continuing when I left Dehra Dun for Delhi. The koels are known to victimize the crows nest, whether they do this to other birds also.

I am back in Delhi now after an enthralling two months stay in Dehra. But, I yearn to get back where my birds are. I presume that they had almost accepted me as a part of the landscape. And, I am sure that they must be missing me too. Maybe this is not true, but nevertheless I would like to believe it that way.

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**D**uring the early morning walks with binoculars and at other times, when opportunity afforded me on seven days 5 to 11 November 1997 - I watched birds at Panampilly Nagar, Ernakulam -  $9.8^{\circ}$  N  $76.3^{\circ}$  E. I also visited the Bolghatty island and recorded the birds occupying it. Altogether 48 bird-species were recorded and the species diversity was not so appealing in as much as time had to be expended before some were located. This was despite (or because of?) the lush green vegetation all over including the wayside foot-paths and mid-road avenue. The days were alternately cloudy and sunny, the average maximum and minimum temperatures in celsius being  $31.09 \pm 1.30$  and  $24 \pm 0.44$  respectively, and the rainfall

## Bird Watching at Ernakulam

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for the period, 123 mm with the total rainfall for the period up to 11 November 1997, 401 mm.

#### BIRD SPECIES:

##### Waders and other aquatic birds.

1. Whitebreasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*): Although every available waterbody was covered with *Eichornia* sp. and the vacant wetlands colonized by aroids and other vegetation, only one bird was recorded from a water-edge with reeds, and another was heard among the floating vegetation.
2. Wood sandpiper (*Tringa glareola*): Four birds were foraging in a grassy field between buildings.

3. Common sandpiper (*Tringa hypoleuca*): Individuals were observed in low carpets of green grass.
4. Gull-billed tern (*Gelochelidon nilotica*): 130+ birds were flying tirelessly about over the back waters, and about 70 of them followed, like disturbed bees over the hive, a speeding motor-boat. The boat gone, most of them alighted each on a pole.
5. Little cormorant (*Phalacrocorax niger*): At about 06.00h, 15 birds were flying overhead towards east as the Cochin Express rolled into Tripunithura. More birds were seen later during the period of observation criss-crossing the sky.
6. Western reef heron (*Egretta gularis*): At Vypeen one bird in its sleek dark-phase plumage flapped along a foot or so above the water surface, behind a fishing-boat, perhaps in the hope of snatching a fish or more that might fall from the boat only to alight on one of the series of poles sticking out of water.
7. Cattle egret (*Bubulcus ibis*): Following the cormorants over Tripunithura was a batch of 20+ cattle egrets. Thereafter everyday more were observed flying overhead in batches besides those on the ground foraging around the buffaloes.
8. Indian pond heron (*Ardeola grayii*): This was a common bird on the wing and sitting inland at waters' edge or on idle boats on the backwaters.

#### LAND BIRDS:

Altogether forty species were recorded from the island and the main land of Ernakulam.

9. Black-rumped flameback (*Dinopium benghalense*): A bird was seen and heard on Bolghatty island.
10. White checked barbet (Also known as small green barbet) (*Megalaima viridis*): A common bird that greeted me at Nagercoil, Kusakaram, Thiruvananthapuram and Punalur on the Western ghats was all over Ernakulam and Bolghatty, calling to each other, or flitting about. I had a feeling that almost every tree there had a bird!
11. Indian roller (*Coracias benghalensis*): Only one bird, occasionally making a raucous call, was recorded on the Island.
12. Common kingfisher (*Aloedo atthis*): Preferring to be only in the vicinity of water, it did not distinguish between fresh water and salt water.
13. Whitethroated kingfisher (*Halcyon smyrnensis*): A thorough carnivore, it was found equally over the waters and on dry ground, the food not being strictly fish alone.
14. Blue tailed bee-eater (*Merops philippinus*): Occurring both on the mainland and island, it was heard and seen over the waters and the lush vegetation.
15. Asian koel (*Eudynamys scolopacea*): Among the cuckoos, this parasitic species seems to have usurped the urban environment, and its call is familiar and loud from Capecomorin upward in Tamil Nadu and the adjacent states. Its throughout-the-year-call with varying frequency and intensity must be an indication of the breeding spells of the host species. On Bolghatty a female koel was chased with such hullabaloo by about ten crows that the tourists halted in surprise to watch the happenings.

16. Greater coucal (*Centropus sinensis*): It occurs in all habitable places at Ernakulam.
17. Roseringed parakeet (*Psittacula krameri*): A gaudy species known for its grace and agility was a common bird, perhaps not as common as it seems to have become in Tiruchirapalli, Tamil Nadu, lording the sky through the day but mostly during the early morning, affecting the fruiting trees and crops nonchalantly.
18. Asian palm swift (*Cypsiurus parvus*): Not abundant, a bird was flying over the vegetation and the waters, where there were some palmyra trees. The palm swifts of Tuticorin shores seem to travel at least 10 km from inland to the feeding area.
19. Crested tree swift (*Hemiprocne coronata*): Only one bird, drenched in the rain, crest not distinct and with long titill tail, was sitting on an electric wire over a street. May have been a female without the brown in the cheek.
20. Rock pigeon (*Columba livia*): Mostly, the birds were occupying high-rise buildings, and the old palace on the Island.
21. Black kite (*Milvus migrans*): This species and the next.
22. Brahminy kite (*Haliastur indus*): Sailed leisurely over the waters and vegetation, occasionally settling on a palm tree or the boughs overhanging the waters. Single birds were widely separated.
23. Another raptor was an unidentified species of Accipiter that glided low over the houses.
24. Brown shrike (*Lanius cristatus*): A few birds recorded from both the main land and the island had darker plumage than the ones I have observed in South Tamil Nadu.
25. Rufous treepie (*Dendrocitta vagabunda*): The bird occupied both the main land and the island.
26. House crow (*Corvus splendens*): The only crow commonly seen all over the place was quite at home over the city of Ernakulam.
27. Ashy wood swallow (*Artamus fuscus*): A few birds were sailing occasionally from high rise buildings and barren coconut ranches for air-borne insects.
28. Eurasian golden oriole (*Oriolus oriolus*): Both the sexes were seen on the island and the mainland.
29. Black drongo (*Dicrurus macrocercus*): It was a familiar bird in both the places of observation.
30. Rusty tailed flycatcher (*Muscicapa ruficauda*): The only individual recorded on the Bolghatty was a typical flycatcher waiting patiently for a moth or other 'creepy-crawly' insect to show up, with an occasional jerk of the tail. Catching the prey on the ground it flew up to another twig of the tree.
31. Oriental magpie robin (*Copsychus saularis*): It was as common a bird as the house crows though not congregating like them. Seen in pairs around houses at Panampilly Nagar, and the busy city areas. I saw them snap up mosquitoes emerging from the septic tanks.
32. Chestnut-tailed starling (*Sturnus malabaricus*): Four birds recorded on the Bolghatty were either sleeping or performing comfort movements. Stouter and larger than the usual forms, a character that they shared among themselves was a white forehead.

33. Jungle myna (*Acridotheres fuscus*): It was the only species of the genus resident at Ernakulam and the island; as common as it is in Thiruvananthapuram and Udhagamandalam.
34. Swallow (*Hirundo rustica*): Birds were flying about and sitting on electric wires, they had the breast-band entire.
35. Redvented bulbul (*Pycnonotus cafer*): Not so abundant as on the plains of Tamil Nadu, birds were heard and seen at both places under observation. Why the red-whiskered bulbul that is so common in Thiruvananthapuram as to be found sitting on electric wires over busy city roads and said to be present in the "entire South Western India upto 2100 m" was not recorded in Ernakulam during my stay is strange.
36. Ashy prinia (*Prinia socialis*): The bird seems to have adjusted to the urban environment, shifting between the natural vegetation and the man-made gardens.
37. Paddyfield warbler (*Acrocephalus agricola*): Mostly only heard in the dense low vegetation, individuals darted between vegetation clumps.
38. Common tailor bird (*Orthotomus sutorius*): Like the bulbul and the magpie-robin, the tailor bird has become quite adjusted to the urban gardens in Ernakulam as elsewhere.
39. Greenish warbler (*Phylloscopus trochiloides*): Its spread during winter over South India is amazing for it occurs in all places of Tamil Nadu upto Cape Comorin. At Nagercoil every street had more than one.
40. Palebilled flowerpecker (*Dicaeum erythrorhynchos*): It is another common bird as the barbet affecting large trees in the gardens and along the roads. Wherever one went

in Ernakulam one could hear the squabbling birds on the wing.

41. Purplerumped sunbird (*Nectarinia zeylonica*): Like a few of the foregoing species this bird is equally at home in the natural habitat and the urban environment.
42. Longbilled sunbird (*Nectarinia lotenia*): Male birds in eclipse plumage and breeding livery were sucking nectar, calling and hovering at tubular corollas. A female was collecting a spider from a web at a window.
43. House sparrow (*Passer domesticus*): A very common and familiar bird affecting the human habitations, busy bazaars and boat jetties.
44. Whitebrowed wagtail (*Motacilla maderaspatensis*): Scattered pairs of the bird were observed in Panampilly Nagar and in the busy city areas.
45. Grey wagtail (*Motacilla cinerea*): Birds were heard and sighted both on main land and the island.
46. Paddyfield pipit (*Anthus rufulus*): Two pairs were recorded from Panampilly Nagar area of Ernakulam.
47. Blackthroated munia (*Lonchura kelaarti*): A pair were observed sitting huddled on an electric wire.
48. Scalybreasted munia (*Lonchura punctulata*): Three pairs were either on the ground or on the wires over the roads.

#### Acknowledgement :

I should thank Mr. Dilip Mosea, my brother-in-law and Rotarian, sister Mrs. Rani Moses, and their two children for my pleasant stay at Ernakulam and the interest they evinced in my bird watching.



We built a house at the outskirts of Udaipur city in the late fifties. The place is called Panchwati. Apart from two more houses there was no other construction at that time and the remaining land was covered with scrub jungle in the vicinity, full of birds and other animals. Jackals, foxes and hyenas were not an uncommon sight. Occasionally leopards also visited the area.

Nearby our house there is a nullah through which the excess water of two lakes of Udaipur : Fatehsagar and Pichola is discharged. At that time the nullah was kachcha and perennial. There were numerous water pools, deep as well as shallow, full of aquatic vegetation. The pools harboured many types of fishes. The nullah abounded in various aquatic birds.

Trees along the banks of the nullah provided excellent nesting site for aquatic birds.

Gradually bricks piled up in the vicinity and the surroundings of the nullah converted into a colony. The denizens also gradually spirited away from the area. Government levelled the nullah, broadened it and erected pucca wall on the

embankment to safeguard the surrounding colony from flooding. Aquatic birds and waders like cormorant, darter, painted snipe, pond herons etc., as well as fishes vanished. Now this piece of land is converted into an open sewerage.

One of the most striking features of this nullah which attracted me was its good population of Indian white-breasted waterhen (*Amaurornis phoenicurus*). Often I used to watch them in the reeds feeding cautiously, constantly jerking their tails and taking advantage of every bit of cover. In the rainy season during the night their raucous roars, croaks and chuckle and their *krr-kwaak, krr-kweak* was a sweet melody and had a tranquilising effect on me.

As the reeds vanished they took refuge in the bushes on the banks but gradually the bushes also vanished. Only a patch remained untouched because it is in our compound. Apart from bushes we planted bamboos and four clumps are flourishing. But this is too small a habitat for the birds, only a pair of the waterhens took shelter in it. During the rainy season of 1985, this pair could be heard during the night from the bamboo clumps.

## My Encounter with a Survivor

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On 13<sup>th</sup> August 1985, early morning I found 2 chicks of these birds at the base of the bamboo clump, I searched for the nest and found it inside the bamboo clump about 9 ft. from the ground. The hen was hiding in the bushes with the remaining brood and constantly calling the chicks. In all there were 8 chicks in the brood but not a single survived. Again in 1986 the pair used the same nest and I first sighted a large brood of 11 chicks on 20<sup>th</sup> August. In the morning of 21<sup>st</sup> August all the 11 chicks were found dead, I failed to find out the cause.

In the year 1987 the pair used the same nest. The chicks were sighted on 3rd September 1987. There were only 8 chicks in the brood. On 8th September at about 8.30 am the brood ventured just outside the bush cover. Suddenly a crow pheasant appeared and caught one of the chicks. The others were inside the bushes. The hen escorted the chicks away from the danger. This helpless chick was released by the crow pheasant but as soon as it reached the bushes it was again

dragged out by the crow pheasant. It played with the chick for 5 minutes and then flew away with the chick in its beak.

From this brood only one chick survived. Also after a lapse of a month both the parents were killed by a domestic cat within a span of four days. A dark cloud loomed over the future of this chick. But the brave chick managed to steer away from many odds surviving and attained maturity. Sentimentally I was so involved that to watch this chick became a part of my daily routine.

During the rainy season of 1989 the waterhen was calling ceaselessly to acquire a partner, and propagate. Night after night and during cloudy weather in the day time it screamed madly to attract a partner and this went on for over a month.

The poor bird seemingly failed in its attempt to attract a partner and left this small sanctuary on 16th August 1989. Thereafter the waterhen has not been sighted in our area.



## The Indian Sarus Crane (*Grus antigone antigone*) - A Threatened Wetland Species



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The distribution of the Indian sarus crane (*Grus antigone antigone*) is restricted to a few north and western states of India (Ali and Ripley 1983). Though once widespread, its population is now chiefly concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Gujarat, and Madhya Pradesh (Gole 1989). Earlier, two large scale attempts were made to estimate the sarus crane population in Gujarat state (Vaishnav 1985), and in the whole country (Gole 1989). In both the attempts, population size was estimated on the basis of a few actual counts, local inquiry, presence of wetland, and cropped area. The species is currently categorised as globally threatened due to rapid population decline and other threats (Meine and Archibald 1996). The present study was therefore warranted to determine the present population size and its decline over the last few years in a district which holds the largest crane population in the agricultural landscape of Gujarat state.

The crane count was made from 3rd to 29th August 1998, in different talukas of Kheda district. A census route was followed on the basis of the taluk road map ensuring maximum coverage (Approx. 75%) of each taluk while travelling a minimum of 250 km. Since it rains during August, the census was avoided on the rainy days. The cranes sighted while driving at slow speed were recorded, and their numbers confirmed by using 10 x 50 binoculars. Besides the actual sightings, inquiry from local people was made for their perception about the existence of cranes.

Since the vegetational structure varied in each taluk, the visibility ranged from 50m-800m from either side of the road. The cranes were recorded in all the 10 talukas of Kheda district.

The number of cranes actually sighted in Matar were (160), Thasra (136) and Nadiad (84). Very few cranes were sighted in Borsad (32), Mahemadabao (14) and Balasinore (16). A total of 573 cranes were actually sighted; however, according to the locals 627 cranes were existing in this area.

The reduction in the population size over ten years period is 62%. The state forest department had estimated 2741 sarus cranes in Kheda district during 1984 (Vaishnav 1985). Compared to 1984 data the current estimate is 80% less. An alarming decline in the distribution range and population size of sarus was also reported earlier (Gole 1989). A density count of sarus in Matar taluk of Kheda district carried out in August 1989 and 1995 on a fixed route had showed a decline of 15% of the population (Parasharya et al 1996).

### Selection of a suitable census method

As a part of detailed ecological study we attempted to estimate the sarus crane population in Matar taluk of Kheda district to supplement the above study during April, May and June 1997, and May 1998. For further refinement of the population estimate, additional effort was made to count the cranes during their night roost at different reservoirs. Therefore, we attempted to work out the population size using two different methods and tried to arrive at a preferred approach to select a method for making population estimation. Cranes encountered enroute and in and around reservoirs were counted within a four hours period, i.e. 1200-1600 hours, in each month. If an area was not covered within the stipulated time, it was taken up on the next day. Cranes sighted within 800 m. distance on either side of the road were taken into account. While performing

the census the presence of the paddy crop, and its growth stage were also noted to understand the crane distribution pattern. Population estimation was made during night roost count on reservoirs during 17th-24th May 1998. All the cranes present in the reservoir were counted till it became totally dark at 2000 h.

During 1997, the sarus crane population in the study area was 432, while during 1998, it was 457. The difference in the number sighted between two years was 25. Moreover this was a minimum population estimate, as only those cranes actually seen on reservoirs and within the crop around were taken into account. However, we might have missed a few cranes in small waterbodies. The total study area covered was 526.03 sq.km. which provided a density of sarus crane of 0.82/sq.km. to 0.87/sq.km.

This process possibly ensured that no block escaped from the total estimate. As it was a dry period, all the cranes converged around the reservoirs for roosting. A total of 548 sarus cranes were counted following this process of night roost count providing a density of 1.04/sq.km. As it is evident from the study there was a difference of only a few cranes in both counts (noon and night) which indicates that sarus cranes behave as a sedentary species and do not indulge in frequent movement; rather prefer to utilise the same area for noon and night roosting (Mukherjee et al. 1999). At least in the summer months, the cranes hardly dispersed 5-6 km. from the reservoir. It was also observed from the study that cranes preferred water bodies for roosting. The study highlights the importance of wetlands for the conservation of sarus cranes.

#### Threats

'Farmer - sarus conflict': As the cranes breed in the agricultural areas, they cause some damage to the crop. However, the damage is not as serious as the farmers perceive, but due to a false perception the farmers do not allow the cranes to breed in their field. Although they do not harm the parent bird, they either destroy the nest or the eggs, or shift the whole nest with eggs to some other place which the cranes do not accept. As a result breeding success suffers.

#### Pollution:

In the study area, the cranes exist only in the agricultural landscape and hence there is a high risk of exposure to different agricultural chemicals particularly pesticides. During the study, seven incidences of pesticide poisoning resulting in crane mortality were observed. In most of the cases the cranes died due to consumption of treated seeds. During the monsoon, the crane family chiefly subsists on food obtained from the agricultural area (paddy crop) and hence suffered from a high concentration of pesticides. It is fortunate that cranes being primarily vegetarian, have not been as susceptible to pesticide as birds of prey or fish eating birds (Harris 1994).

#### Industrial pressure:

A rapid industrialization in Gujarat is taking place around the manmade reservoirs resulting in drastic decline of habitats

suitable for the cranes. The industries are utilizing the water from the reservoir and in addition influxing detrimental toxicants in the habitat. Though we have seen the cranes feeding in the industrial polluted area there is no confirmed report of death due to industrial toxicants.

**Drastic changes in the land use pattern and cropping pattern:**  
With the increase in human population, rapid urbanization and Industrialization is taking place which is responsible for a drastic change in the land use pattern. The sarus crane inhabited the agricultural landscape of Kheda district.

#### Electrocution:

There are several instances of cranes being electrocuted. The high tension wires passing across the land are the major threats. Usually the cranes fly at a very low height and hit the electricity grid wires and get electrocuted.

From the study we would like to suggest that two basic steps are required to be taken up urgently. The sarus crane is still listed in the Schedule IV of the Wildlife Protection Act (1972). Looking to its present status it should be shifted to Schedule I. Meine and Archibald (1996), have suggested that the species may be shifted from CITES Appendix II to Appendix I. Immediate steps for legal protection must be given to the most preferred wetlands.

The removal of the second egg from the nest and artificially rearing could be tried and the chick could be introduced in a suitable area.

Through our educational efforts people are now protecting the cranes and farmers have stopped destroying the nests and eggs of these birds.

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## Nesting Studies in Nalabana Island, Chilika Lagoon, Orissa



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**C**hilika lagoon (1165 sq. km) is the largest brackish water wetland in India and one of the 'Ramsar sites'. A total of 94 species of aquatic birds including 59 migratory, 6 locally migratory and 29 resident species congregate here in winter season for feeding and roosting from different parts of the world. 'Nalabana' one of the its islands (named after a weed species *Phragmites karka*, locally known as 'Nala') alone hosts over 75% of the total bird population of the lagoon and is declared as a 'Bird Sanctuary' since 1987. The island is situated in the central part of the lagoon, covering an area of 15.53 sq. km. The core zone (6.72 sq.km) of the island is an open mudflat. It remains completely submerged under water from July to November and gradually exposed during the winter months. The buffer zone, 8.81sq.km in area remains under water throughout the year. As summer proceeds, the core zone is exposed completely with all its sand ridges and mudflats. A number of flora such as *Suaeda maritima*, *S. nudiflora*, *Salicornia brachiata*, *Cynodon* sp., *Cyperus* sp. sprout up. These features of the habitat of the island provide not only substantial amount of food to the birds but also a safe roosting and breeding site.

While surveying the population of shorebirds in the month of March, a large breeding colony of mixed species was observed. Among them, 3 species of shorebirds namely, Indian whiskered tern *Chlidonias hybrida*, little tern *Sterna albifrons*, and Indian blackwinged stilt *Himantopus himantopus* breed in the core zone of the island whereas purple moorhen *Porphyrio porphyrio* and little grebe *Podiceps ruficollis*, preferred the buffer zone.

### Indian whiskered tern (*Chlidonias hybrida*)

The nest is a shallow, oval depression made up of dry roots of *Cyperus* sp. and *Cynodon* sp. The average clutch size is 3

(n=32). The colour of the egg is pale grey with dark brown patches. The average size of the egg is 4.2 cm (n=25). The chicks have white upperparts with grey underparts. Bill and legs are black.

### Little tern (*Sterna albifrons*)

The nest is a shallow, oval depression on bare sand. The average clutch size is 3 (n=26). Colour of the egg is pale grey with brown patches. The average size of the egg is 3.5cm (n=25). The chicks are greyish white. Bill is black. Legs are pale yellow.

### Indian blackwinged stilt (*Himantopus himantopus*)

The nest is prepared on the mudflat by the fresh stems and roots of *Cyperus* sp. The average clutch size is 4 (n=22). Colour of the egg is bright white with dark brown patches. The average size of the egg is 4.3 cm (n=25). The chicks are pale white with black bill and red legs.

### Purple moorhen (*Porphyrio porphyrio*)

The nest is prepared slightly above the water level within the interwoven dense stems of *Schoenoplectus littoralis*. The nesting materials used are stems and roots of the above species. The average clutch size is 4 (n=30). The colour of the egg is grey with brown spots. The average size of the egg is 4.6cm (n=25). The chicks are purplish blue with red bill and legs.

### Little grebe (*Podiceps ruficollis*)

The nest is a floating mass, made up of floating vegetation such as stems and roots of *Potamogeton pectinatus*. The average clutch size is 3 (n=20). The colour of the egg is pale white stained with brown spots. The average size of the egg is 2.3 cm (n=25). The chicks are dark brown in colour.



## A Rare Sighting of the Frigate Bird

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I could share this rare sighting, at the same time wishing for a pair of binoculars and wondering whether I should dash home to get one.

Meanwhile, the frigate bird did not go unnoticed, as I watched, a crow patrol was heading towards it. The crows here ruthlessly mob any kite they can get to. But this time the patrol did a quick about turn before it reached its quarry. Evidently the sight of its beady red eye and its no nonsense beak had sent a very clear message to the crows, something like, 'Watch out, here is your guru, so clear off!'

Then, to my great delight the frigate bird let itself be borne downwind towards me - This time as it was overhead I took in whatever details I could make out. It had a noticeable white patch on the breast, and no sign of a red throat for sure. This was a marvellous sight, the body and wings, so very elegant.

**O**n that very blustery windy day, I was taking my habitual morning walk along the Pondicherry beach road, delighting, in the fresh air and watching the fishing boats inch their way to the harbor through the rough seas. For no ostensible reason I happened to look up. Instantly, my eyes got locked onto a big bird, gliding effortlessly, some 20 m above my head. Its wingspan was roughly one-and-a-half times that of pariah kite and I knew at once that this was a frigate bird, thanks to countless hours of watching the National Geographic and Discovery Channels. Black body, forked tail, neatly angled wings and a distinctive beak.

Before I could take in more it had moved upwind, towards the Gandhi statue some 100 m away. I could watch in anguish, wishing desperately it would come, my way again. Then, I scanned the walkers, hoping to find a familiar face with whom

More so, because ever since I had read about stray sightings of frigate birds recorded in the JBNHS, I had always wanted to see one. A fellow birder here had sighted a trio some 20 years ago and in very similar circumstances. Soon after the frigate bird came over me the second time, it glided away with the wind, staying exactly over the beachline, all this while it had hardly ever flapped its wings. I kept on watching till it disappeared out of sight.

Apparently it needs a few days of very strong southerly wind, common during the onset of the SW monsoon, to blow ashore the frigate and other oceanic birds. The BBC weather watch had been showing inbound gales over the southern parts of India for the two previous days and also present was a low pressure area off the Andhra coast contributing to the sustained strong winds. The newspapers too had reported

that fishing boats could not set out in the Gulf of Mannar during this period, due to the heavy winds.

Finally, back home I checked the books and found that the female great frigate bird *Fregata minor*, matched my observations (see p 575, Birds of the Indian Subcontinent, Grimmett, et al). So, fellow birders in coastal areas, wanting to notch up oceanic birds, need to keep an eye on the 'beeb' weather watch, especially during the monsoons.

**P.S.** Just as I was polishing up this article, on the 11 Sept I saw another frigate bird, also on a morning walk. But this time it was off and the sky being overcast no identifying details could be made out. Only that it was headed south in a gentle westerly breeze, which had prevailed over the last few days with some intermittent rain.



### BOOK REVIEW

**VOYAGERS OF THE SKYWAYS.** *Aakashwatanche Prawasee (in Marathi)*, by Kiran Purandare. Rajahamsa Prakashan, Pune. **REVIEW BY Prof. MADHAV GADGIL**, Centre for Ecological Sciences, Indian Institute of Science, Bangalore 560 012

Kiran Purandare is a first rate naturalist, a keen observer of birds and a master of the Marathi language. He has the gift of bringing alive before one's eyes interesting incidents, notable encounters with birds and other creatures. As when a hawker of sundry goods climbed up a neem tree in which several pairs of crows had been building nests out of man-made materials such as metal wires and nails. The crows were furious, mobbing and pecking him. He bore it all stoically and went about his business of pulling off and throwing down each and every crow nest. The job done, he climbed down and separated out copper wires of value intertwined with iron wires and nails from the nests. These he bundled for sale and marched off dumping all the iron stuff beneath the nesting tree. Over the next few days, the crows built back their nests picking up the discarded iron wires, and adding to them from elsewhere.

The book is a treasury of such graphic descriptions of life of a large number of Indian birds - of wiretailed swallows nesting in a water tank atop a house in Pune, of egg brooding ioras accepting a foster chick, of male grey partridges proclaiming ownership of a breeding territory, of a crested hawk eagle swooping down on a pond heron. In the course of ten essays the author deals with over twenty-five species of birds, regaling us with anecdotes of his personal encounters that are most enjoyable to read. Kiran Purandare delights in particulars, he does not offer many general explanations. But he does speculate in places. He talks of a pond heron being driven by a male crested hawk eagle towards his mate who ambushes it. Many students of animal behaviour would question this interpretation. We do know that chimpanzees drive their prey by design towards other members of the troop, but none of the lower mammals and birds are believed to be capable of such a strategy.

My one complaint is that he indulges a little too much in hyperbole while describing how marvelous the bird life is and how ecstatic he has felt while watching them. This tendency reaches its limit in describing the paradise flycatcher, repeating over and over again how thrilled he and many other bird lovers were in beholding this lovely apparition. He admiringly quotes EHA whose "Common Birds of Bombay" I never tire of reading. But EHA has a great sense of humour and excels in conveying his message briefly and succinctly. If Kiran Purandare could add these virtues to his many existing talents, he would make for an even more pleasurable reading.

**BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT OR THE GUIDE?**  
By Richard Grimmett, Carol Inskip & Tim Inskip. 1998. 888pp., 153 colour plates by 12 artists, numerous figures, tables and maps. Christopher Helm, A. & C. Black Limited, London. Hard cover price: £65. ISBN # 0 7136 4004 9.

[Also published as A Guide to the Birds of India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives. 1999. Princeton University Press, New Jersey, U.S.A. Cloth cover price: \$85. ISBN # 0 691 00687 3] Review by KUMAR GHORPADE, 1861 Bethel Street, Bangalore 560 043.

Yes, the book I had myself longed for, a true meaty and authentic Guide, has arrived! The plates are superb — no two opinions about that, though a few (especially on Phasianidae and gulls and terns) could have been better. Nelson's plate (# 111) had some mynas' bills cut off due to incorrect binding. And I had the joy of seeing a most beautiful little bird, properly, for the 'first' time - Stoliczka's tit-warbler, and this instilled in me a desire to see it on the Himalayan mountains. There will be some minor errors when I look at the book in detail when I acquire one (beg, borrow, steal or..... buy !), but my years of instinct (!) tell me there wouldn't be much to fault. Well done you painters, you !

I will of course do a separate, thorough, book review as I have done of the "Salim Ali" 12th edition of the *Book of Indian Birds* (1996) and look at the reviews of Zafar Futehally (*Newsletter for Birdwatchers*), Tom Roberts (*Journal of the Bombay Natural History Society*), and the one by Raghupathy Kannan &

Priyantha Wijesinghe which is to appear in the *Condor* (plenty of mistakes in their text that appeared on this website though). But, I cannot resist making some comments and observations straightaway :

True the book is heavy but I believe it is, as they say in India (?), "worth its weight in gold". I pooh-pooh complaints that it cannot be carried into the field because I myself do not check books in the field but make detailed notes and then enjoy the scent of discovery enthusiastically at home, or at campsite, with a hot cup of tea or coffee. As the title openly owns up, it is a Guide and not a Field Guide. Because of its bulk, the binding is bound to suffer repeated handling, and the copy I saw was already 'split' in the middle. I am also glad the producers of this book have used portraits of endemic Indian birds on the dust cover. The synoptic text following the plates, and their explanatory pages are also well written. The index of English names is good but the Scientific names index cites only binomials in Genus-species sequence and not the other way around as well. The Glossary could also have been expanded suitably. I have not been able to read the Introductory text but saw that it was brief and to the point and covered many important matters.

This book does have some limitations and irritations, though. Basically I lament the non-use of the SYNOPSIS numbers, even if the "new" English names have been selected and the revised classification sequence of Sibley-Monroe-Ahlquist followed (for marketable novelty and nothing else ??). These would have given the user rapid access to the earlier databases of Salim Ali & Ripley (1968-1974, 1987), Stuart Baker (1922-1930), and even older references. The numbers in the Inskip-Lindsey-Duckworth OBC Annotated Checklist (1996) would also have been very convenient. It is peculiar that the COMPACT HANDBOOK has been ignored, almost with impunity ! Scientific work is, a matter of continuity and research and the indices and references cited are major pointers to the scholarship of the authors of any such work. The Literature mentioned at the end of the book is very disappointing and omits many useful works which the INDIAN HANDBOOK's "Eclectic Bibliography" (Volume 10) includes.

I believe Burma is also solidly a part of what is called "The Indian Sub-continent" and has been incorrectly removed, after Stuart Baker's NEW FAUNA, by Ripley and his successors. My biogeographic knowledge confirms this fact exhibited by birds, insects, plants and other wildlife. Roberts' remarks that Pakistanis would not be allowed sales of this book there is sad because Kashmir is shown as it was before our independence! Why can the "Line of Control" not be inserted as a hatched line ? Politics should not smother Science. The English names "revolution" is also sad. Why do we have to do this when some history is behind their utilization and familiarity to people of this area ? The authors are foreigners to the land they write about and that may be the reason. Their convenience on top of us sub-continenters'. Similarly, this blind adoption of the Sibley-Monroe-Ahlquist, DNA-based, reclassification is also unfortunate. Though many polytypic species have been discussed in the text and plates fairly adequately, I still maintain that more taxonomic research is needed (like Per Alström is doing now and exhibiting clearly) and this will show that many so called "subspecies", now hesitatingly recognized (and defended staunchly by veteran

Humayun Abdulali – no surprise because what his gut feeling tells him is that his subspecies are in fact really good species !), should be raised to species status for a clearer comprehension of our area's bird taxa. We need a trained and experienced team of Systematic Ornithologists to sit together and revise this aspect before many other books flood the market and face a short life, needing further updating and scientific truth.

What else ? Maybe later, but let me close by saying that this is certainly the book carrying the finest ever illustrations published on our region's avifauna. I am glad that Carl D'Silva also shares this praise. But, Blyth's Tragopan (*Tragopan blythii*) stares at me every time I approach my working table with the BNHS' calendar perched on top of it, and I still think W. Foster and his contemporaries of yore created stupendous, picturesque, portraits of many of our birds in the last century. Even if it means saving for months, I will encourage and recommend every serious bird watcher in our region to acquire this prize possession, simply because this is what is going to help you best to identify and learn about the staggering diversity of our feathered co-habitants in our sub-continent.

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**BIRDS OF THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT BY RICHARD GRIMMETT ET. AL., REVIEW BY Lt. Gen. BALJIT SINGH, "Sukhuw", P.O. McCluskie Gunj, Dist. Ranchi, Bihar 839 203**

To me, the difference between an "armchair" enthusiast and an "amateur" was a mere clever play of semantics. Somehow, "armchair" sounded more grown-up and more dignified, so I had placed myself in this category of birdwatchers. Now that Mr. Lavkumar Khacher looks upon the armchair birdwatcher as a sort of QRC of this tribe (last sentence, page 41, NLBW Vol 40, May-Jun 2000), I have promptly upgraded myself to the amateur status! Even that will not entitle me to review a book such as the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent (BIS) but I do wish to at least express my feelings for the BIS.

I simply fell in love with the BIS at sight. Despite the hefty price tag, I could not take my eyes away from the Book in a shop in June last year. As it happens on such occasions my wife sensed my predicament and promptly gifted the Book to me. Indeed the book is a pretty object as no pocket field guide can ever be where utility must prevail over aesthetics. Most illustrations in the BIS are compelling and thumbing its velvet smooth pages is almost a sensuous experience. And that is more significant for an amateur because his approach to birdwatching is perhaps in the reverse order of the ornithologist's. The amateur is often impelled to look out for birds in the field because he happened to see some stunning illustrations/photographs in a book or on a TV Screen in the first place. Not many seem to have understood this better than Whistler and later Martin W Woodcock. There is something magical about the black & white sketches and plates in Whistler's; they propel the imagination to even conjure up the colours let alone the physical likeness of the bird in the field. Woodcock's illustrations transport the amateur to the ethereal plane and he goes back to it again and again for keeping alive the visual delights. Together with the BIS, this set would be the envy of all amateurs, anywhere; pretty objects on display, a trove of knowledge and a lure for thumbing through.

The fairest of all reviews of the BIS was perhaps by Ranjit Manakadan in the Hornbill (Jul-Sept 99). No one will fault Ranjit Manakadan for damning the quality of the bird distribution maps. But far more grave (to the minions of the State) and at the sametime laughable (to those who haven't lost the gift) is an error in the mother-of-all maps on page 22 of the Book. Legend numeral 4 would have us believe that the Chamdo Military Region of the Peoples Republic of China is part of the Assam Plain! How wonderful that ornithologists should at last find a novel way to put an end to the Knotty Sino-Indian boundary problem. That is, if mandarins on both sides have not lost the gift of laughter.

When the authors and publishers of the BIS do decide to redraw maps they had also better remove the numeral 4 from the trans-Himalayan region on the map and find a more subtle way to indicate this bird endemic zone. Because, Nations have gone to war on lesser flimsy grounds; remember the assassination of a mere archduke at Sarajevo in 1914 ?!

By the way, I know for sure that the phrase "Great Game" (the Sino-Indian problem being one of its off shoots) was coined by Rudyard Kipling and immortalized in his book "Kim". But who coined "Cartographic aggression"? Was it that greatest of all Imperialists, Lord Curzon? Surely not Messers Grimmett and Inskip!

## CORRESPONDENCE

**THE BIRDS OF IRISSET CAMPUS, HYDERABAD.**  
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The Indian Railway Institute of Signaling, Engineering and Telecommunication, located near the Secunderabad station on the way from Mettuguda to Tarnaka, is a sprawling campus with a lot of greenery and veritable forest-like area, abounding in bird life. Our house was right in the middle of this area surrounded by numerous trees like silk cotton, rain tree, peepul, rosewood, Polyalthia etc. The vast area contained a stream which attracted water birds, a grassy meadow that spread on either side of the stream, and also patches of open scrub. The area was visited frequently between 1991 and 1995. A total of 64 bird species recorded in the area are presented below. Observations were also made on the activity, call notes and behaviour of the species sighted.

This article is written on behalf of our brother Karthik, who was a victim of muscular dystrophy, which confined him to a wheelchair from the age of eleven years. As a boy, Karthik was very energetic, active, and full of life. Once the disability hit him at the age of eleven, he took his misfortune boldly and managed to finish his matriculation. In spite of his disability, he took to bird watching, a hobby that he learnt all by himself. He watched birds as one of us took him around in a wheelchair. He made observations of birds and maintained notes. Karthik was a devoted, enthusiastic and serious bird watcher. Karthik was genuinely concerned about the problems that birds faced due to adverse changes of habitat and other threats of extinction. His interest in birds grew in strength, but later his

hands could no longer support the binoculars; after which, he needed help to carry out his work. He wanted to publish all his observations, but unfortunately his life abruptly ended on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1997.

[Among the 64 species listed are the raptors which are getting rare; the black-shouldered kite, shikra, white-eyed buzzard, tawny eagle. Editor]

- 1) Pond heron *Ardeola grayii*; 2) Cattle egret *Bubulcus ibis*; 3) Pariah kite *Milvus migrans*; 4) Grey heron *Ardea cinerea*; 5) Black-shouldered kite *Elanus caeruleus*; 6) Brahminy kite *Haliastur indus*; 7) Shikra *Accipiter badius*; 8) White-eyed buzzard *Buteo teesa*; 9) Kestrel *Falco tinnunculus*; 10) Red-headed merlin *Falco chicquera*; 11) Tawny eagle *Aquila rapax*; 12) White scavenger vulture *Neophron percnopterus*; 13) Blue rock pigeon *Columba livia*; 14) Spotted dove *Streptopelia chinensis*; 15) Red-wattled lapwing *Vanellus indicus*; 16) Rose-ringed parakeet *Psittacula krameri*; 17) Koel *Eudynamys scolopaceus*; 18) Cuckoo *Cuculus* sp.; 19) Pied crested cuckoo *Clamator jacobinus*; 20) Common hawk cuckoo *Hierococcyx (Cuculus) varius*; 21) Coucal *Centropus sinensis*; 22) Spotted owllet *Athene brama*; 23) Nightjar *Caprimulgus* sp.; 24) House swift *Apus affinis*; 25) Palm swift *Cypsiurus parvus*; 26) White-breasted kingfisher *Halcyon smyrnensis*; 27) Green bee-eater *Merops orientalis*; 28) Indian roller *Coracias benghalensis*; 29) Common hoopoe *Upupa epops*; 30) Small green barbet *Megalaima viridis*; 31) Crimson-breasted barbet *Megalaima haemacephala*; 32) Common swallow *Hirundo rustica*; 33) Indian pitta *Pitta brachyura*; 34) Dusky crag martin *Hirundo concolor*; 35) Red-rumped swallow *Hirundo daurica*; 36) Hulous-backed shrike *Lanius schach*; 37) Golden oriole *Oriolus oriolus*; 38) Black drongo *Dicrurus (adsmilis) macrocerus*; 39) Rosy starling *Sturnus roseus*; 40) Black-headed myna *Sturnus pagodarum*; 41) Common myna *Acridotheres tristis*; 42) Indian treepie *Dendrocitta vagabunda*; 43) House crow *Corvus splendens*; 44) Jungle crow *Corvus macrorhynchos*; 45) Small minivet *Penelopides manillae*; 46) Red-vented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer*; 47) White-browed bulbul *Pycnonotus luteolus*; 48) Jungle babbler *Turdoides striatus*; 49) Red-breasted flycatcher *Ficedula (Muscicapa) parva*; 50) Ashy wren-warbler *Prinia socialis*; 51) Common tailorbird *Orthotomus sutorius*; 52) Leaf warbler *Phylloscopus* sp.; 53) Magpie robin *Copsychus saularis*; 54) Indian robin *Saxicoloides fulicata*; 55) Grey wagtail *Motacilla cinerea*; 56) Large pied wagtail *Motacilla maderaspatensis*; 57) Tickell's flowerpecker *Dicaeum erythrophrynos*; 58) Purple-rumped sunbird *Nectarinia zeylonica*; 59) Loten's sunbird *Nectarinia lotenia*; 60) Purple sunbird *Nectarinia asiatica*; 61) House sparrow *Passer domesticus*; 62) Red munia *Amandava (Estrilda) amandava*; 63) Spotted munia *Lonchura punctulata*; 64) Common rosefinch *Carpodacus erythrinus*.

**Editor's Note :** Karthik's two sisters, Indira Srinivasan and Sandhya Srinivasan continue with their bird watching spurred by memories of their brother.

**OWLETS PECKING AT A SHIKRA AND NOTES ON A THREE TOED KINGFISHER.** ZAIN BIN A.P., Ambalaparambil House, P.O. Inumbuzhi 676 513, Malappuram Dist., Kerala

On the morning of May 19th 1999 there was a tumult of trees, mynas, jungle owlets and other birds among tammarind trees.

On enquiry, I could see owlets pecking at a shikra *Accipiter badius* holding a brownish cuckoo-like bird in its claws on the ground, and unfeathering the prey to paralyse it.

When disturbed the shikra took to flight with the prey and in its typical fashion, perched on a branch keenly observing me. Due to constant mobbing by crows and my approach, the shikra dropped the prey. The fluttering victim died as soon as I picked it up.

The prey was an immature common hawk-cuckoo. It had yellow eyelids, white iris, tarsus with yellow base. It differed from an adult cuckoo by having brownish feathers rather than greyer ones and the throat was streaked. The curious thing was the presence of a black sticky (tar like) substance that covered its tarsus, toes and claws.

#### THREE-TOED KINGFISHER

On 12th May 1999 at 3.25 p.m. I saw a three-toed kingfisher perched on a branch about 2 m height within a shady bamboo thicket over a small canal.

The bird could be readily distinguished from the common kingfisher by its brilliant colours and smaller size. There is no forest patch around our place within a radius of c.15 km, so let me please know whether this bird is usually confined to forest habitats.



#### ORIOLES ON THE GROUND. URUJ SHAHID, Near Pandit Chakki, Moh - Maharaj Nagar, Lakhimpur-Kheri, U.P 262 701

This refers to the NLBW [40 (4) Jul-Aug 2000] 'Golden oriole on the ground' by Zaibin A. P. According to Ali, S. & Fuchsally, L (1968), the black-headed oriole and the golden oriole are entirely arboreal and are never seen on the ground. On 26.5.2000, at about 3.45 p.m., I sighted a black-headed oriole on the ground in a well-wooded area near cultivation. A few minutes later, the bird saw me and flew off. A little later, I saw the brainfever bird on the ground. Next day, I wrote to Dr. Asad R. Rahmani about the rare event. A few days later, I received a letter from Dr. Rahmani which read, 'The black-headed oriole is generally an arboreal bird but for drinking water it comes to the ground. I have seen a photograph of a golden oriole drinking water from a waterhole in a forest. Even brainfever bird is regularly seen on the ground picking up hairy caterpillars which have fallen down from trees'.

I think, it is interesting to note that some species that are entirely arboreal and seen on ground are often omnivorous birds (eg., oriole, hawk-cuckoo, hornbill).

#### Acknowledgement

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#### COMMON/SCIENTIFIC NAMES OF BIRDS. ASHENDRA KUMAR RASTOGI, 325, Old Haider Ganj, Lucknow 226 003

Imagine a novice with two books e.g. "The Book of Indian Birds - 12th Edition by Salim Ali" & "A pictorial guide to the Birds of the Indian Subcontinent - 2nd Edition by Salim Ali & S. Dillon Ripley", waiting eagerly for the newsletter and when it arrives, he is excited and opens the NL (Vol. 40, No. 4, July-August 2000) and starts reading "Birding in Etawah", when in comprehending the list of birds in this article he spends about two hours checking and cross checking the common names, changed names, scientific names with his two books and at last to his satisfaction he finds the following:

- 1) Two birds e.g. river lapwing (*Vanellus duvaucelii*) and great thick knee (*Esacus recurvirostris*) missing in his two books.
- 2) White necked stork has become woolly necked stork and like wise pale harrier - pallid harrier, marsh harrier - Eurasian marsh harrier, rufous backed shrike - long tailed shrike, large pied wagtail - white browed wagtail, honey buzzard - oriental honey buzzard, open bill stork - Asian openbill, black-winged kite - black shouldered kite, short-toed eagle - short-toed snake eagle.
- 3) Scientific names of Terek sandpiper  
*Tringa terek* has changed to *Xenus cinereus*  
 White ibis *Threskiornis aethiopica* changed to *Threskiornis melanocephalus* (black-headed ibis)



#### UNUSUAL NESTING ACTIVITY OF THE RED-VENTED BULBUL PYCNONOTUS CAFER : TWO PECULIAR FEATURES. DR. SADANANDA V. BELLARY\* AND DR. R. N. DESAI\*\*, \*S.K. Arts & H.S.K. Science Institute, Hubli 580 031, Karnataka. \*\* Vivekananda Nagar, Vidyagiri, Dharwad 580 004, Karnataka.

The red vented bulbul *Pycnonotus cafer* (Ord. Passeriformes; Fam. Pycnonotidae) is generally known to inhabit and construct nests in bushes and trees at a height of 1-3 mts. in deciduous forests, cultivated lands and gardens close to human habitations (Vijayan, 1980). However, in recent years the bird is constructing nests regularly inside human dwellings and also reusing the old nests (Desai, 1993 & 1995). Perhaps these measures resorted to by the bird indicate fast disappearance of its natural and safe nesting sites and the impending predation of its chicks during breeding seasons. In this communication we report yet another interesting nesting pattern observed during three successive seasons - 1994 - 1996 and again during this season (1998).

In March 1994 a pair of red-vented adult bulbul was noticed by us constructing a nest in a ceiling of the auditorium of our college\*. No particular attention was paid to it. We accidentally discovered the nesting activity of the bulbuls at the same place again in March 1996. We did not disturb their routine egg-laying and other activities. After the chicks fledged off, the nest site was visited only to find two curious features. Firstly, there were three nests constructed one above the other during the three consecutive seasons. Secondly, they were fastened on one side to a pair of steel rods jetting from the ceiling of the hall and to a pair of thick threads tied from the wall for

bunting for decorating the hall, for support at the bottom. Similar feature has been again observed recently. This time the nests have been constructed one above the other fastening to the electric wires. Incidentally it may be mentioned that the *P. cafer* breeding even during August in Dharwad is conspicuously unusual and delayed phenomenon. All these nests are typically cup-shaped shallow structures built of thin long rachis of the leaves of the plant *Phylanthus distichus* (Fam. Euphorbiaceae) and some cobweb. On an average each measured 6.0 x 6.3 x 4.3 cms.

Perusal of the literature does not reveal any earlier report on such nesting activity by any bird species including the bulbuls.

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**BIRD LIFE IN UPPALAPADU VILLAGE TANK, GUNTUR.**  
**K. MRUTYUMJAYA RAO and KANAPARTHI RAMANA, 2-35-15, Nellimarkavari Street, Perrajupeta, Kaknade 533 003.**

Here are some recent observations of bird life of Uppalapadu Village Tank, Pedakakani Mandalam, District Guntur, Andhra Pradesh. Dated 9-9-2000

|                   |                  |
|-------------------|------------------|
| Glossy ibis       | 1200             |
| White ibis        | 600 (250 nests)  |
| Openbilled storks | 4000 (600 nests) |
| Cattle egrets     | 500              |
| Coots             | 10               |
| Purple moorhen    | 6                |
| Little cormorant  | 100              |
| Night herons      | 200              |

This is the first time that glossy ibises have visited the tank in such large numbers. But the tank is facing a severe threat from villagers. During the recent water crisis most of the villagers agitated and demanded the authorities to clear the

vegetation from this tank. Therefore the authorities let off the water and deepened the tank. At that time the pelicans were ready to leave the tank with chicks within the next 10 or 15 days. The pelicans with their chicks were frightened due to the dredging noise and human activity. Some pelicans left the tank.

The tank still has a bright future for birds, but the water problem has to be resolved before it is too late.

#### SPOTTED MUNIA (LONCHURA PUNCTULATA), USING INTERLACED CABLE WIRES AS SUPPORT TO ITS BULKY GRASS-WOVEN NEST IN DHARWAD TOWN. **Dr. J.C. UTTANGI, No. 15/1210, Mission Compound, 2nd Cross, Main, Dharwad 580 001**

It is common observation in the city market place at Dharwad that a few birds like the house sparrow, house crow, house swift, pariah kite, grey tit, red-vented bulbul, common myna, rock-pigeon, spotted owlet, large pied wagtail, pied bush chat, hoopoe and even magpie robin find nesting sites in different corridors including roofs of old buildings, windows in walls, concrete houses with overhead water-tanks, towers, crevices in rude dweller rooms, windows in walls, treetops, telephone poles and T.V. antenna. But, to find in the busy market place a pair of spotted munia, *Lonchura punctulata* not hesitating to use a group of interlaced cable wires to support their bulky grass-woven nest is really amazing. The aggregating cable wires loosely twined into a bundle had been left hanging there on one of the pillars supporting a few rude dweller rooms on the 1st floor of a building standing about 25 feet above the ground.

This had attracted the two little birds. I was passing through the well-known Lorie Bazaar of Dharwad on Monday the 11th, September 2000, in the morning around 8.45 am. A bird crossed in front of me. As I glanced at it, I saw a long grass leaf blade held in its beak. I stood there watching and enjoyed the bird's manners and actions as it went on pushing the grass blade into the place it wanted to remain. Some birds are most adaptable and they are influenced by availability of nest sites. The present instance of a munia using cable wires to support its nest is not only surprising but it is also alarm-raising because most members of this species prefer to place their grassy nest hidden in bushes or in creepers growing on trellis-work of verandas of bungalows or in other such covered sites but not in open sites as the one described here.

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**Cover : Small bee-eater (*Merops orientalis*) makes aerial sallies from its chosen perch, chasing its insect prey in glides, dives and steep, effortless swoops and returns to its perch to batter the prey and eat it. Bee-eaters live in small amicable social groups and exhibit altruism by enlisting helpers at nest.**

Photo : S. Sridhar, ARPS